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**ARCHIE**  
**JOSCELYN**

**IN THE SADDLE**

A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

ABOUT THIS WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC

# DEATH IN THE SADDLE

**By ARCHIE JOSCELYN** When the slender, hard-riding young man known as Chinook reached the remote settlement of Landmark, he thought it was the end of the dangerous trail he had ridden to avenge the death of his sweetheart, for which Chinook blamed the outlaw and bandit, Rialto.

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But scarcely had Chinook reached Landmark before he was hustled into jail. Then surprisingly Chinook's escape was arranged by young Vivian Ford. It marked the beginning of a running battle more dangerous than any Chinook had ever known, for Vivian and her brother, George, owners of the Ghost Ranch, were the targets of Rialto and his murderous band.

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Somewhere on Ghost Ranch was hidden a fabulous treasure of outlaw loot. Killings became a minor matter to a man like Rialto, who believed that he, and he alone, knew the location. But he had not counted upon the arrival of Old Mugs Farrington, who, for reasons of his own, threw in his lot with Chinook and the Fords.

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A hair-raising climax brings ultimate justice to Rialto and romance to Vivian Ford and fighting, young Chinook.

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*A thrilling WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC of violence and romance, of retribution long delayed and of a mystery whose secret drove men to kill.*

# **DEATH IN THE SADDLE**

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**by Archie Joscelyn**

Novel Selections Inc.

New York

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## Chapter I

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THE SIGN above the door proclaimed this to be The Palace Hotel, and Chinook had discovered, in one quick survey of the town, which could be made from the vantage-point of the middle of the main street, that it was the only hotel. The cracked mirror above the rough board wash-stand and tin wash basin, however, contradicted the designation, but Chinook was not considering that angle of it as he surveyed himself in the glass. He'd make a one-night stop here, and no more.

The face which looked back at him from the mirror was lean and long, deeply tanned. Black hair showed in disordered array, his eyes were black to match. An equally disordered brown mustache hid part of a wide, rather grim mouth. A sagging cartridge belt with six-gun was comfortable around his faded blue levis, and the bowed legs gave eloquent testimony that this man who had signed the register as James Carter, with the address, West of the River, was no stranger to the saddle, nor had been for many of his two-dozen or so years.

With an impatient shrug, Chinook left the room, tramped down the rough board stairway and to the street below. He'd ridden into Landmark at noon, and had intended to stop only long enough for dinner for himself and the piebald mustang he rode—a wiry little cayuse which could travel tirelessly and fast, and had been doing a lot of that for the past several days. A bit of extra rest would do the horse good, at any rate.

But it meant delay for him, and Chinook was impatient of delay. Somewhere ahead there was a man known as Rialto, whatever his given name once had been. And this Rialto had lived over-long already. The thought, as always, sent a dark angry flush into Chinook's cheeks, giving him in that moment the appearance of an Indian.

Not for six months, however, had he worked at a regular job or for wages. That long trek south and east into Missouri had taken time, and what he had found at journey's end, so utterly different from the dreams which had sustained him on the trip, had taken more time—and money. To ride a thousand miles to a childhood sweetheart, and to find that woman wife to another man, deserted by him and dying—Chinook's jaws clamped hard.

Well, he'd stayed with her to the end, had paid all doctor bills, and funeral expenses as well. It was the least that he could do for Amy, and she had been sweetly grateful. But it had left him broke, and when a job was offered him today, a job which meant only a day or so delay at most, and good wages to boot, he had been in no position to refuse.

He stood on the street corner for a moment, chewing with the old impatience at an unlighted cigar—a tall man who just missed being handsome, and who, in the settling dusk, drew more than one admiring glance from shaded windows not too far away. Then, because everything irked him, and there was nothing else to do, he turned toward the saloon across the street.

Tomorrow he was to carry mail for the next forty miles. All mail through this country was carried by private contract, and letters went for two bits, if thin, and were seldom accepted if bulky. The regular carrier, they had told him, had failed to show up. Would he take the mail through to Moccasin?

For most men, even though he needed the money, Chinook would have refused. Delay, in his present mood, was a sin. But it was Carson City McClain who had made the request, and it had been a pleasure to run into a familiar face after weeks of seeing no one he knew. Sight of Carson City's homely mug was proof that he was getting back to the fringes of the land he knew—that land where he would never bring the bride of whom he had dreamed for five lonely years.

Carson City wouldn't be able to visit this evening, so the saloon, and maybe a game of poker, was the next best thing. It would be expecting too much to find anyone else that he knew, hereabouts. Chinook pushed open the door, and stopped abruptly. For here was someone else that he knew, all right.

Over at the long bar, attracted by the sound of the door, Orel Wilcox was turning, a half-filled glass of whisky in one big hairy paw. His eyes, light green in color and with an odd, staring expression under thin eyebrows, widened in surprise and recognition, then slitted in quick calculation.

Chinook stood, quiet and taut. It had been close on two years since he'd seen Wilcox, and that had been a long way from here—San Francisco. Then, as now, Chinook had been proving that his ironic address in the hotel register was correct—the territory West of the River, and that meant the Missouri. Somehow he'd always been fiddlefooted, though of late he'd had his plans and his dreams of

settling down—dreams that were no more than that now, or ever could be.

A sardonic humor drew down his mouth now, as he watched Wilcox. Wilcox had been a gambler when he had seen him last, a tin-horn if there ever was one, and crooked as a snake with a broken back. It had been Chinook who had caught him at cheating, that night, and had proved it on him, necessitating a departure from the town between two days. The Vigilantes had frowned on such activities.

Wilcox would remember, of course, and probably be spoiling for trouble. Doubly so, in that it looked as if he were an old-timer here, and he'd be pretty sure that Chinook was friendless and alone. And the irony of it was that Chinook was spoiling for just such a ruckus as seemed promised, yet was honor bound to refuse to fight, no matter what might come along. Carson City had exacted such a promise from him only a few hours before.

"There's jus' one thing, Chinook," the old-timer had warned. "This mail's got to be carried on through, soon's it arrives. Cain't stop fer hell ner high water. I was plumb at my wits' end, who to get that I could trust, till you showed up. Only thing is, don't go gettin' in no ruckus—not till *after* it's delivered. Cain't run no risk of anythin' delayin' the mail. Promise me, now."

Chinook had promised, readily enough, with no suspicion that he'd run into any trouble. But now it was plain to him that Wilcox had sized the situation up just as he'd expected. Here was a chance for revenge, and likewise the man would be motivated by fear. If he could forestall any possible allusion to himself and his past record by striking first, that, to him, was only common sense.

A tiny organ in one corner of the long room crashed discordantly and wheezed to silence, and then Wilcox's bellow filled the hollow like a buffalo bull in a wallow.

"Well," he roared jarringly. "I'll be damned if it ain't the man from San Francisco—the Spanishers, furnace country. So mebby I ought to say the man from hell, eh? The hombre the Vigilantes wasn't smart enough to catch!"

Suddenly silence gripped the room. Chinook drew in his breath sharply, fists clenching, those red danger signals flaring in his cheeks. Then he let it out again slowly, getting control of himself. He mustn't let Wilcox taunt him into losing his head.

"Lost yore tongue, Chinook?" Wilcox demanded and his tone was half-jocular now, half-mocking. "Mebby you need a drink of

bug-eye to oil it up again. C'mon drink with me. I ain't choosy. Blazes, no. I've associated with card sharps an' tin horns before now."

So that was his line, eh—to attribute to Chinook the very crimes which Chinook had proved on him. The silence of the room held, all eyes fixed on the two of them. But Chinook had a tight grip on himself now.

"Maybe you aren't, Wilcox," he said. "But I am. No whisky for me."

He started to turn toward the door, but Wilcox placed himself in front of him.

"So you won't drink with me, eh? Too stuck up to drink with an old pal now, eh?" Wilcox advanced truculently, the mask of good-nature abruptly cast aside. "Either you drink with me, or fight! Take your choice!"

Chinook was breathing hard. Wilcox was beefy, and would outweigh him by thirty pounds, but Chinook was rock-hard and that didn't worry him. But a promise was a promise.

"It'd be a pleasure, Wilcox, to wipe the floor with you," he said. "But I can't do it—not now. Some other time."

"Tonight's when I feel like usin' somethin' yella on the floor," Wilcox sneered. "Scart, are you?" with a flip of his wrist, he sent the remainder of his glass of whisky splashing into Chinook's face.

For a moment, Chinook saw red. But something rang a warning bell inside his brain at the same moment. There was more to this than just desire to even old wrongs, on the part of Wilcox. There must be. What it could be, Chinook couldn't even guess, but somehow, Wilcox must have known of his arrival in town, and that he was slated to carry the mail on the morrow.

Otherwise he'd tread more cautiously, for he knew well Chinook could use his fists. Chinook wiped a sleeve across his face.

"Later, Wilcox," he promised. "And that's a promise."

It was, even if it meant coming back here, once the mail was delivered, and taking a few extra days. But his promise seemed an empty boast in the ears of the onlookers, to cover his own retreat. Raucous laughter followed him as he stepped back outside, into the night. But his mind was still busy. What was really back of Wilcox's eagerness to discredit him here?

Few were abroad in the town when Chinook presented himself at the express station, where Carson City McClain was agent. From the way that his old friend looked at him, Chinook knew that he'd

heard the story—all of it, and probably with embellishments. He nodded cordially.

"I'm thankin' ye for rememberin' your word, Chinook," he said. "'Twas hard, I know. But Orel Wilcox does nothing without a reason, and his reasons are no good for any other man. If ye'd just take this job regular, now—ye could deal with him as well."

"I won't be able to do it, Carson," Chinook said. "But I appreciate it, just the same."

"'Tis too bad to lose a good man like ye'self, Chinook," the agent sighed. "But meetin' ye again has been pure pleasure. And here comes the mail. Watch your step, and good luck to ye!"

Chinook gripped his hand, noticing that a small knot of men had collected and were scanning the horizon expectantly, with an occasional sidelong glance toward himself, or an oblique look to where, in his tiny office, Carson City had gone back to writing with a scratchy quill. This mail contract was important, and Carson City McClain took real pride in it.

A dot on the horizon materialized into a running horse with a man on its back. It came up with thunder of hoofs in a little sliding cloud of dust, the pouches were jerked loose and tossed to Chinook. With a last wave to Carson City, he was off at a gallop, the piebald eager to go. Forty miles to Moccasin. Would it be worth while, after all, to take an extra pair of days and return here, just for the pleasure of ramming a few lies and insults down Orel Wilcox's fat throat?

The miles passed swiftly, without event. His pony had run off its first wild burst of excess energy, had settled down to a steady, ground-devouring pace without any frills. The sagebrush, which stretched on every side here, whipped about its hocks, making a small rasping sound. Chinook scanned the bigger clumps of it mechanically, the breaks and small brushy coulees which marked the gradual approach to the line of blue mountains in the distance. Carson City had warned him that there was a possibility of trouble. Sometimes Indians liked to have a try for a scalp or so.

He topped a long, gradual slope, and there was trouble ahead. A horseman, squarely in his path, and just as plainly waiting for him. The beefy figure of Orel Wilcox.

"Begun to think you'd got cold feet and wasn't comin' at all," Wilcox taunted. "Been waitin' for you. There's some mail in them bags you're carryin', that I been waitin' around to get for more'n a week. Now, are you handin' it over without any trouble, or do I have to kill you?"

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## Chapter II

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AS HE SPOKE, Wilcox's hand was coming up, clutching his gun. Much was suddenly clear to Chinook. Wilcox had known, last night, that he was supposed to make this ride today, and had aimed to get him drunk or into a fight—anything which would make it easier to handle him today!

But, if Wilcox had gotten the idea in the saloon that Chinook could be bluffed, that he was afraid of him and wouldn't fight, he was sadly mistaken. Though the fight, if Chinook could contrive it that way, would still have to be postponed till the mail was safely through. He'd promised that much to Carson City McClain, and now he gave his pony its head, leaning low along its neck, urging it to a sudden burst of speed.

Chinook knew the piebald, knew its reserves, its fleetness, and the result now was as gratifying to him as it must have been astonishing to Wilcox. Running like a scared jackrabbit, they swerved around and shot ahead, then Chinook swung the mustang a little, to take advantage of a sudden slope of the ground.

Surprised as he plainly was, Wilcox fired, but the first shot went wild. He jerked the gun around and triggered until it was empty, and Chinook could have picked him off then like a sitting duck.

The temptation was strong, but two things made him hesitate. After what had happened last night, no one would believe his story, with the possible exception of Carson City—and he'd face the choice of likely being hung for murder, or riding on as a fugitive, with such a charge to dog his footsteps.

Even more impelling was his hunch that this was not the time to empty his gun or to make a fight of it. By the time he'd left the temporary protection which the slope afforded and Wilcox could reload, the revolver range would be pretty long, and there was more cover ahead for a man who knew how to use it.

Now it had settled down to a grim chase. Finding that the range was too long, Wilcox was pursuing, and after that first dash which had caught him by surprise, it became evident that his horse had just about as much speed and stamina as Chinook's pony. One reason

might be a fresher horse. At any rate, he held his own now, neither losing nor gaining, but coming along relentlessly.

Taking a quick look over his shoulder, Chinook wasn't worried. Whether he realized it or not, Wilcox was playing right into his hands now. Carson City had told him that there was a ranch house about fifteen miles ahead, where three men were trying to get an outfit started. From the distance he had already covered, as well as the signs, he'd soon be coming in sight of their place, and if Wilcox wanted trouble then, where there were witnesses—

Chinook had revised his first guess, that Wilcox had been in this section of country very long. Evidently he'd just come here to wait for this mail, having somehow learned of something important which was to go through this time. The way he came on now argued that he wasn't familiar enough with the country to know of the ranch house ahead.

Again the gallant little piebald topped a slope, then Chinook's breath caught in his throat. Here was the ranch, all right, only a quarter of a mile ahead, and that distance was being swiftly shortened. Or here was where the trio had sought to build a home in the wilderness.

Now there was only a blackened pile of ruins where house and barn had stood, and, easy to see in the grass and charred sagebrush, a couple of huddled, motionless forms. The other man who had lived here was probably in similar state not far away, even if he wasn't to be discovered at first glance.

A few lazy wisps of smoke still arose from the smouldering embers. Chinook felt his throat tighten, a small, cold lump seemed to form in the pit of his stomach. He was close enough now for a look at the nearest sprawled form, and one good look confirmed his worst fears, that this was the work of Indians. The man had been scalped.

Carson City McClain had warned him that occasional small parties of raiding young bucks swept through here, though he had discounted the danger as mostly talk. But this was the real, grisly thing. And it had happened only a little while before. That war party was apt to be somewhere around still—

Even as he looked for them, Chinook saw them, riding out of a draw and racing toward him, yelling hideously. He had gradually increased his lead until he was nearly half a mile ahead of Wilcox, but now these Indians were squarely in his path, and, like it or not, and he certainly didn't, it looked as though the mail was going to be delayed a little.

There were five of them, he saw, and as he swung his horse, Chinook made his decision. Conditions such as these could make queer

bed-fellows, but Wilcox, whatever else he might be, was a white man, and as much prey for these scalp-hunters as anyone else. For the safety of the mail, it was up to him to turn back and join forces with Wilcox, so that the two of them might stand a chance of fighting off the common enemy.

But this was a time for fighting, and Chinook was glad now that he had saved his bullets. He turned in the saddle, lined an Indian in his sights, just as the brave was lining him with his bow. The gun cracked, and one pony ran riderless. That would leave only two apiece now.

Another gun spat sharply, and Chinook felt a surge of relief. That was Wilcox's gun, and in the pinch, he was acting like a real man. Then, to his amazed consternation, as he swung fully around in the saddle again, Chinook felt his pony staggering heavily, and the next instant, as he kicked his feet clear of the stirrups, it was going down in a sprawling heap, game to the last, but dead with a bullet through its heart.

Shock almost drowned out his rage for a moment. But as he flung himself off and lit on his feet, Chinook saw that Wilcox was swinging now to join with the Indians, and full understanding came to him, and with it a raging contempt. The man was even worse than he'd believed of him, then—a renegade! And that probably accounted for this handful of braves being on the war trail. Wilcox must have lured a few discontented young warriors off the reservation with whisky and a promise of adventure and easy loot.

Chinook's eyes slitted thoughtfully. If he had gone to all this elaborate trouble, it could only mean that there was some mail here which he considered as being pretty important—this was a game of high stakes into which he had been dealt a hand! And Wilcox had killed his horse, to add to the score.

But if the odds had been tough a moment before, they were a lot worse now. He was still opposed at five to one, and one of them had a six-shooter which he had demonstrated that he knew how to use. Likewise, they were all mounted, and he was afoot.

Two thoughts rioted in Chinook's mind. One was for the mail, which was assuming more importance all the time, and the other was that he had to come out of this alive, or Wilcox would not only rob the mail and murder unchecked as a renegade, but he'd spread the story and find ways of making it believed, that Chinook had died as a renegade himself! And that thought, on top of the insults of the evening before, was unbearable.

The blue haze of the mountains toward which he had been heading

for days loomed now in sky-piercing majesty, apparently only a few short miles away, but Chinook knew the deceiving quality of this clear dry air, knew how far it really was to such shelter as they would afford. The only near cover was a small washed-out gully some fifty feet away, the result of a flash flood.

Arrows were already starting to shower around him, but Chinook paused long enough to jerk loose the mail pouch. A bullet smashed into it as he turned, jerking it heavily. With the pouch in one hand, he grabbed his gun again, and with an Indian riding down at him, a short shot away, knocked him off his horse. For a wild moment, Chinook entertained hopes of getting the cayuse himself, but it bolted wildly, and he followed its example, heading for the gulch.

He reached its shelter, flopped down as Wilcox shot again. A stalk of sage, sheered off, dropped like a sprig of flowers on top of him, and Chinook had the unchancy suspicion that this might be a flower to adorn his grave.

But he had shelter now, of a sort, and to get a decent shot at him with either guns or arrows they'd have to come pretty close. And he figured to make that a risky proposition.

Slipping fresh shells into his gun, Chinook crouched low, watching where, with Wilcox, they had gathered at a little distance, for a pow-wow. They had a lot of respect for his shooting, and he guessed that, if they had been alone, the Indians would have had about a belly-full already. But with a white man to take charge, he could expect plenty of trouble. The Indians would have too much pride to quit as long as Wilcox kept on fighting. And Wilcox could hardly afford to quit now.

Resignedly, Chinook saw that they were going to try the usual game. The four of them, circling around him at a run, keeping back out of sight behind their horses as much as possible, and shooting at him whenever a chance presented itself. From their standpoint, it was a method of warfare hard to improve upon. They presented difficult targets at best, and four of them at a time could be darned distracting. If he tried to center on one, that left him exposed to three others.

But the choice was theirs, and he had to make the best of it. Chinook was cool enough. He'd been in more than one ruckus, in seeing a lot of territory west of the river, and experience was a steadying thing. And there was one thing in his favor. Indians, riding at high speed, were not too good shots with bows either, and Wilcox, save for those two close shots, was wasting a lot of lead. Now they were starting.

The circle, wide at first, narrowed steadily, and then the arrows began to keen at him. Wilcox's gun cracked, a spurt of dust flew up

a few inches from his head. Chinook emptied his gun, reloaded, and repeated the performance. Which wasn't getting him anywhere, he realized grimly.

Disregarding three of them, though to do so took all his resolve, Chinook fixed his attention on one Indian who looked like a chief, and wore a few extra feathers to prove it. Next to Wilcox, he was the most important target, and the renegade was prudently keeping pretty well back out of range.

Another arrow thudded, and Chinook winced a little. It had come from behind, had plowed through his coat and shirt, along his shoulder, scratching it and drawing blood, and the arrow was still sticking there in his clothing. It almost spoiled his aim, but he steadied, squeezed the trigger, and the chief did a wild flop off his cayuse and lay sprawled in the sage.

But Wilcox was heading straight for him now, coming at a gallop—and Chinook realized in the same moment that his gun was empty again!

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## Chapter III

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CHINOOK crouched low, his fingers seeming to be all thumbs as he frantically jerked shells from the loops of the cartridge belt.

He broke open his gun, tried to punch a shell in, and dropped it. Cold sweat broke out on him, and without looking up, he steadied grimly to the task, had three in, and snapped the gun shut, brought it up. Only then did he become aware of the sudden hush which had fallen.

He raised his head a little, stared in amazement. A few moments before, Wilcox had been galloping at him, gun in hand, the odds had been all set for wiping him out. Now there was no one near him.

A slow grin of relief creased his face as understanding came to him. The Indians had had enough. Never lacking courage, their viewpoint was not that of a white in battle. Chinook had proved himself a worthy foeman, and as such, deserved respect and perhaps a break. Moreover, they held no personal animus against him. When the price for a scalp became too high, it was only good sense, in their view, to quit and withdraw, instead of increasing it needlessly.

That was what had happened now. The fall of their chief had de-

cided them, and the others had simply quit and retreated. And Wilcox, suddenly finding himself deserted, facing a man who coolly waited for him to come within certain deadly range, had likewise lost all stomach for the encounter. He had swerved his horse, was heading now toward the mountains as though the devil rode at his coattails.

Chinook finished reloading his gun, jerked the arrow loose from his coat, and stood up. His knees were a little shaky in the sudden reaction, but the pony which the chief had ridden was only a little way off and he had to catch it.

Doing so proved unexpectedly easy. With his own saddle and bridle on it, and the bullet-scarred mail pouch in place again, he was ready to resume his journey toward Moccasin. He'd lost his piebald, but this dun colored mustang was apparently about as good an animal.

"Guess I've nothing to kick about—everything considered," he decided. "Won't even have to go back to hunt Wilcox up, seein' as he's headin' west himself."

He considered that angle of it briefly. It wasn't likely that he'd meet up with him again. Wilcox had probably had enough. And there would be no more trouble from the remaining handful of Indians. He could deliver the mail, collect his wages, and have nothing to interfere with his search for Rialto. And Wilcox, or any other man, was small-fry with him, as compared to Rialto.

The sky had grown overcast, and now the clouds were settling, so that the distant line of mountains was shut away. Presently it began to rain, a cold, dreary downpour which soaked him to the skin. The mail was well wrapped, so it would be all right, but he wasn't so lucky. Chinook shivered as the early dark drew on. All that he wanted of the immediate future was to reach this town of Moccasin. Yet, unless he were lucky, he might miss it entirely, in the dark and storm.

He'd stop at the first good shelter he could find, Chinook decided. This was all new country to him, becoming a little more broken now as he headed west. Here were foothills, proof that the mountains were nearing. What looked like a creek, with a dark line of willows, showed as a darker blur against the horizon.

Chinook realized suddenly that his horse was on a road, following it. That should lead to shelter somewhere. The rain pelted now in long slanting sheets, coldly raw, turning the road slick and oily. The saddle was sticky with it. And then a yellow splotch of light showed like a beacon through the night.

This looked like an old frame shack, with a ramshackle sort of a barn behind it. It was hard to see much. Chinook dismounted stiffly,

walked across and knocked at the door. After a moment it was jerked open so suddenly as to leave him blinking in the glare of the light from a coal-oil lamp set on a table.

"Come in, stranger, step in," the man holding the door invited. "You look wet, and half-frozen."

"I am. Thanks." Chinook stepped inside, to be seized by a violent fit of shivering. He hadn't realized before how cold he was.

He looked around the room, started moving toward the glowing warmth of a big pot-bellied stove, then stopped, rigid, eyes narrowing at sight of the man just rising to his feet from behind a table still laden with dirty dishes and scraps of food. Orel Wilcox!

Shock coursed through Chinook. Whatever he had expected to find here, this wasn't it. The fact that Wilcox had come here, openly, argued that he was among friends again, so it would be prudent to play a cautious game. Chinook kept his voice steady.

"Hello, Wilcox," he said. "I hadn't expected to find you here."

"Wilcox? That ain't my name, as you know good an' well." Wilcox pushed around the corner of the table, and Chinook realized suddenly that he had been prepared for this meeting. His voice took on a thread of scorn.

"But I bet you didn't expect to find me here," he added. "That part's true enough. You'd have been mighty careful to shy clear of here if you had!"

"What's this, Rialto? Do you know this hombre?" one of the half-dozen other men in the room demanded. "What's it all about?"

Rialto! Shock coursed through Chinook at the name. *Rialto!* The man he had come a thousand miles to find! Here was trail's end—but not as he had pictured it, even in the wildest stretches of his imagination.

He'd known this man in San Francisco, a couple of years ago, known him as Orel Wilcox there. And it appeared that Wilcox had conveniently used that same name in the other town where he had found him the day before. But here he was Rialto—and after having followed him to this general section of country, there could not be another man of that name hereabouts! That would be stretching the long arm of coincidence too far.

Driven out of San Francisco and probably finding all California too hot for him, with the Vigilantes on his trail, Wilcox could easily have gone back east to the edge of civilization, and there under the name of Rialto, have met and married the girl who had been Chinook's childhood sweetheart—and, having married her and gotten hold of her money, deserted her as he had done. That was all possible enough.

And that helped to explain a lot which had been incomprehensible before. Chinook had known him as Wilcox, but he had never associated him with Rialto. But Rialto had undoubtedly heard, plenty of times, of Chinook! And now, having failed to get rid of the man whom he had hated back in San Francisco, who now he had double reason to fear, Wilcox, or Rialto, was already trying to work some new and more deadly scheme.

Chinook roused from the shock which the name had thrown him into, to see that Rialto was answering the question which had been flung at him.

"Know him? You bet I know him," Rialto growled. "Too damn well. Chinook Carter, he's called—or at least he used to go by that handle. No tellin' what he calls himself these days. But seein' him, it's in my mind that these robberies and killin's that have been pesterin' the country, ain't so big a mystery, now!"

Chinook stared at Rialto, breathing hard, while all eyes focused on him. This thing was so sudden, and he was so cold and shocked that he could hardly think straight, but gradually the enormity of what Rialto was trying to implant in the minds of the others became clear. He took a swift step forward.

"What do you think you're gettin' at, Wilcox—or Rialto, if that's your name hereabouts? Out with it—and I'll pin yore ears back for the dirty liar you are! You was wantin' trouble, last night at Landmark. Well, you can have all you want, now!"

For a moment, the animosity between the two men was like a charged current in the room. But the crafty light in Rialto's eyes glowed brighter now.

"Landmark?" he echoed. "I ain't been near Landmark for weeks—as these boys know, though if it's trouble you want, I'll be glad to accommodate you! And I'll tell them yore record, in just a minute! I got somethin' important to see about, first. Don't let him get away," he added, and circled, darting past Chinook, and out, closing the door behind him.

For a moment longer, Chinook stood, caught by a fresh fit of shivering, becoming more insistently aware of how cold he was and of the inviting warmth of the glowing stove. He moved toward it, wondering what Rialto could have up his sleeve now. But it would be easy enough to prove what he had to say, when the time came. Carson City McClain and plenty of others would furnish proof that Rialto had been in Landmark the night before, under the name of Wilcox, whatever sort of a story he might have told here to account for his absence.

Rialto was playing a desperate game, there was no doubt of that. Had the excuse of the mail been just a blind? There was still plenty here that Chinook didn't understand—but here at last was the end of the trail!

He was beginning to feel the warming effect of the room a little, while the others watched him in suspicious silence. And in that moment Rialto came back in, wet but smirking with triumph. He was carrying something, and Chinook stared with narrowing eyes. This wasn't the mail pouch, but it was his own saddle-bags, which had been tied to the rear of his saddle.

"I'm going to have a look," Rialto announced, throwing the bags on a corner of the table, shoving the dishes back. "Reckon mebbby this is somethin' you wasn't countin' on, eh, Chinook? Since you sure didn't figure on runnin' into me here, or else you'd never have stuck yore nose inside this town!"

Town! Then this must be Moccasin—a house on the outskirts, of course. In the dark and storm it had fooled him into supposing that this was just an isolated ranch house.

"I was lookin' for you, as you know well enough," Chinook growled. "Where's my mail pouch? And keep your dirty fingers out of my saddle-bags!"

"Yeah? We'll suit ourselves about that. Don't know what you're talkin' about, when you say mail pouch. Sure wasn't none on yore horse just now."

Rialto was untying the bags as he spoke, working with a certainty which made Chinook uneasy. And his claim that there had been no mail pouch—had he stolen it in those few moments? Chinook started to move around the table, but a couple of the men got in his way, and Rialto was talking again.

"This Chinook comes from back in my old country, down Kansas way," he explained. "Left there not long before I did—about two jumps ahead of the law! And I been thinkin' lately that the description of the bandit that's been terrorizin' the country around here, had a right familiar ring! Indian, some folks said. Don't he look like an Indian?"

Like a triumphant card trick, he jerked open the bags. Those knotted, wet leather straps seemed to come open pretty easy, and then Chinook stared at what Rialto was pulling out. A long, thin package, wrapped in slicker cloth, which he spread open on the table top like a further conjuring trick. To disclose a wad of bank bills.

It was a good trick, Chinook realized, while every man stared. Rialto had beaten him back to town, probably by an hour or so, and,

forewarned, he'd had time to make his plans against the time of Chinook's appearance. Now he was being framed even as he watched. Rialto peeled off the top bill, a fifty-dollar denomination, and handed it to a stoop-shouldered, graying man who wore a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Take a look at that, Porter," he invited. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I got a mighty strong suspicion that the number on it 'll check with some of the missing bills from the Stockman's Bank!"

Porter took the bill, carried it closer to the light, still in the tense silence, and scrutinized it carefully, his lips moving. When he looked up, his eyes were cold.

"You're right, Rialto," he agreed. "This is one of the stolen bills!"

"And there's three-four thousand of the missing loot right here," Rialto went on swiftly. "These are his saddle-bags, and knowin' him, I followed my hunch! Reckon a lot of these killings and robberies around here lately can be explained now. He thought he wasn't known, and took a chance on comin' in here. But down Dodge City way, he's wanted, dead or alive!"

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## Chapter IV

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"**T**HAT'S A LIE!" Chinook roared, and the dark blood in his cheeks gave him again the look of an Indian. "A dirty frame-up—"

That was as far as he got. It was plain enough that Rialto was among friends. The moment of tensity, of stunned silence, had given way now to rising anger on the part of the others. Rough hands grabbed Chinook, too many to fight against, and, his protests shouted down and drowned out in louder roars, he was hustled out into the night again, and along for a short distance to where another building loomed ghostily. Desperately he struggled.

"Listen here, Rialto," he shouted, managing to drown out the others. "You can't get away with this! I came up here to tell you about your wife, that you left behind in Kansas—"

"Wife?" Rialto mocked. "Listen to him now! I never had a wife!"

A door in the building ahead was opened and he was hustled inside. A lantern was lit, and Chinook saw that was the jail, apparently empty

until his appearance, though there was a little fire in a stove, which took off part of the bite of the night air. But he was still given no chance to tell his story. Keys were lifted down from a nail on a wall, a cell opened, and a fist crashed against his mouth, breaking his lips, slamming him inside, the door was banged shut and locked.

If this wasn't a spot that he had stepped squarely into, it certainly had all the ear-marks of it, Chinook reflected wryly, as he was left alone. To follow a trail, often a cold one, for a thousand miles, then to find his man so unexpectedly, and to have the tables turned on him with such neatness and despatch!

Rialto, of course, had been forewarned and able to plan it, and very likely some of the men in that house had been his confederates, tipped off in advance as to what to do. Rialto and his activities were becoming more involved all the time, but one thing was plain enough. He was playing for big stakes, and playing both ends against the middle.

There was little doubt now in Chinook's mind that Rialto had robbed the bank, that he was the mysterious outlaw who had been terrorizing this section of country. But he posed as a friend of law and order, and this had appealed to him as a perfect opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—to rid himself of a man who had become a menace to his very existence, and to produce a culprit to fit all the crimes in the calendar!

He must have had that package of stolen money fixed, ready to hand, and he had gone out, then had not only removed Chinook's saddle-bags, but had managed to untie them and slipped the package of evidence inside. Naturally he was willing to lose a few thousand in loot, if by so doing he could save the rest and set a noose about Chinook's neck, to prevent him from telling what he knew.

It had taken careful planning and skillful work, but with his confederates, Rialto had managed it so far—and in such a way as to make it look convincing. Chinook could guess what the next move in the game would be, and that it wouldn't be long in coming. For Rialto knew that his only chance now lay in moving fast, not giving Chinook a chance to talk to anyone.

The lantern had been blown out again, and the jail was dark. Rain beat monotonously against the little barred window, dripped from the roof. What little of it he could see, impressed Chinook as being well-built. Peering out, he could see a few other scattered lights beyond.

With that first shock of discovery concerning Rialto past, Chinook's mind was active now, and it increased at what he could see. About a

block away, a stronger light glowed now, and shadowy figures passed in and out through a doorway, in ever-increasing numbers. Chinook understood. That was a saloon, of course, and the news was being spread, with Rialto seeing to it that everybody in town heard the story and had plenty to wash it down with.

Once they were drunk enough, worked up to a proper pitch of fury, Rialto would stage a necktie party. That would be the surest way to protect himself—by getting rid of Chinook before he could tell his story.

Chinook tensed, turned back from the window. Somewhere a floor board creaked. Which meant that somebody was out there, in the office beyond the cell block, moving around, but without striking a light. Someone who tried to move silently. Chinook's straining ears heard the muffled jingle of keys, a step, then a voice—a woman's voice, low but vibrant, spoke from the gloom.

"Where are you—you that they locked up?"

"Right in here," Chinook answered, wondering, and a moment later he saw a dim white face peering in at him through the bars. He could see no more than that, but somehow he guessed that the woman was young—likely about the same age as Amy had been. Her voice was low, but strained with excitement.

"What did you mean, when you said that you came up here to tell Rialto about his wife, that he left behind in Kansas? I heard you say that much."

Chinook hesitated, sensing what might be in the wind, remembering things he had heard in San Francisco, concerning Rialto and his seemingly fatal attraction for women. The man was big, obese, and coarse, but he was a ladies' man. And a blunder here, Chinook realized might react the wrong way, and cost him any possible chance of help which he now had.

"Why do you want to know that?" he asked.

"I've a right to know," the girl answered fiercely. "I—I've got to know—" she stopped for a moment, as if to get control of herself. "I'm supposed to marry him, tomorrow," she added quietly.

"It's lucky for you that I got here today, then," Chinook said grimly, resolving to trust to the bitter truth. "He's already got a wife and kid, back in Kansas—or he had—as fine a girl as ever made a fool of herself over a skunk like him—"

"What do you mean, he *had*?" the girl demanded fiercely.

"Just that. He married her about a year ago or a bit more, then

pulled out for Montana here, takin' every cent she had, about five thousand dollars. He told her he was going to buy a ranch up this way, and that then he'd come back and get her. He never came back. Pretty soon he even quit writing to her. Other things turned up, after he'd gone—shortages in books, money he'd gotten away with, folks he'd cheated. She knew then that he'd deserted her, with a baby coming along. It killed both of them! That's the sort of a skunk he is. Leaving a sweet girl like that, then aiming to marry you now, without even knowing that his wife was dead!"

The girl had listened in silence. Only her knuckles, where she gripped the bars of the cell door, stood out whitely now, and her eyes seemed to burn at him. Her voice was hoarse.

"Was this girl—was she your sister, or something?"

"Sister?" Chinook flung at her, and the pent-up bitterness of the thing was in his voice. "She wasn't any relation of mine."

"I see. You loved the little fool, and for her sake you came up here to kill Rialto!"

"Say, who you talking about?" Chinook growled. "Don't you go calling her a fool. She was one of the finest, sweetest girls that God ever made, and she got a mighty rotten deal. What if she did fall for him? Plenty of other women have done the same, if that's being a fool. How about yourself?"

"Sure, I was that big a fool too," the girl admitted readily, then her voice grew proud. "But I'm no such fool as to break my heart and die, over Rialto or any other man that ever drew breath! They aren't worth it!"

She had spunk, Chinook admitted grudgingly. Plenty of it. But he didn't like her. For one thing, she didn't seem to doubt his word, even against the man she had been aiming to marry. But she wasn't letting it floor her, either.

"Guess you didn't care much about him, after all," he said. "You're not even stickin' up for him."

"Because I was a fool once is no excuse for keeping right on being one—like you are," she flashed. "I've been getting my eyes opened for some time back."

"How do you figure me as a fool?" Chinook asked curiously.

"Because you're still mooning like a love-sick calf over that other girl, who had no better sense than to turn you down for him! Then you come up here, risking your neck, on account of her!"

Chinook stared, glad that she couldn't see his face, wondering

uneasily how she could be so uncannily right. At least in part. Of course, he'd been gone a right long time, and Amy had given up expecting him to come back, but to arrive there and find that she had married someone else had rankled. Finding her at death's door, in poverty, however, had driven such thoughts from his mind.

Curiously enough now, he wasn't offended any longer at what this girl said, though she did put it baldly—love-sick calf—and with most people, the charge would have made him fighting mad. Now, with sudden resolution, the girl was fumbling with the keys, fitting one to the lock of the door.

"You'll have to get out," she breathed. "There's a mob being built up, and they'll lynch you, since they think you robbed the bank the other night."

"I was in Landmark last night, as plenty of folks will testify, and I carried the mail here tonight," Chinook said hotly.

"Another man just brought the mail in a few minutes ago," she said. "Though that could have been managed, I guess."

The door swung open. Chinook stepped through, peering at her curiously.

"I'm mighty obliged to you," he said. "But how come that you believe me so fast? How do you know that I didn't rob the bank?"

"Because I saw Rialto untie your saddle-bags and plant that money in them," she answered unexpectedly. "It's all plain enough. But nobody's in any mood to listen to you—or to me either, not tonight. You'll have to ride, and keep riding—"

"Nope," Chinook said decisively. "I came up here to get Rialto, and I'm sure going to do it."

The girl had him by the arms then and was shaking him, almost fiercely.

"Because of that other girl, who's dead?" she demanded. "Oh, can't you see? You'll just get yourself killed for nothing. Your money's gone—if he stole any of it from you. And she's dead. You've nothing to stay for—"

"I've plenty more to stay for, and I'm stayin'!" Chinook growled. "You don't know the half of it. But now, you get along before anyone finds you here. I'll aim to make myself inconspicuous for a while, to show that I appreciate what you've done for me."

"See that you do," she flashed, and hurried ahead of him down the dark hallway, then she was out into the rain-wet night and gone like a flitting shadow.

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Chapter V

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CHINOOK followed, pausing only long enough to ransack a drawer of the scarred old desk in the office. There, as he had hoped, he found a six-shooter which would take the place of the gun they had taken away from him.

Drawing her cloak closer about her, the girl sped straight for the shelter of her own house, not far off. She had been sitting there, alone in the dark, a prey to conflicting emotions and tormenting fears, when Chinook had first arrived, had seen him ride up and stop.

Watching from her darkened window, she had recognized Rialto as he left the other house, being outlined in the lighted doorway for a moment, then had crossed straight to where Chinook's horse stood. He had led it to where a bit of reflected light from the window of the other house aided, and in that light she had been able to see what he was doing. When they had dragged Chinook away to jail, she had stood in the open door of her house and heard his shout.

Panting a little now, as if from a long run, she hurried inside her own house again, paused a moment, then found a lamp, struck a match and drew it across the wick. As a glow sprang up, she took off her wet coat and tried to settle down to waiting, she hardly knew what for. But instinct told her that plenty more would be happening, soon.

It came in a guise which she had not expected. Boots tramped on the plank walk outside, a knock shook the door sharply, then, before she could reach it, it was shoved open and Rialto stepped quickly through. Behind him was a man, in a long, black coat, with a two days' growth of beard raggedly on his face, whom she had never seen before.

"What—what do you want?" she demanded, and, despite herself, she could not keep a slight tremor out of her voice, for there was a mocking, frightening light in Rialto's face now, his greenish eyes under those thin brows seemed lifted, jeering.

"What should I want, but you, my dear Vivian?" Rialto asked, and though he tried to make his voice sincere, the thread of jeering mockery was strong in it. "Allow me to present Dick Parsons, who lives up to his name. He is a parson. One of these sky pilots who

gets on a horse and travels over a parish big enough to carve a couple of states out of. Dick, this is Vivian Ford."

"Glad to know you, Miss Ford," the parson acknowledged, a bit jerkily.

"He just happened to hit town here this evening," Rialto went on. "Which is the best kind of luck, of course. When I found out about it, and that he had to be going on again, first thing in the morning, I brought him right over. Since I remembered that being married by a sky pilot is what you've been wanting, right along."

Vivian lifted one hand to her throat, where something akin to terror affected her breathing. This man didn't look like a parson, despite the rusty black coat which he wore. He had more of the look of a saddle tramp, or even a tin-horn.

"But I—oh, this is too sudden," she protested, fighting against panic. "I can't be married right on the spur of the moment, without—without a dress, or anything—"

"You've got a dress on, and you look mighty pretty in it," Rialto said jocularly. "And there's no time like the present. That's why I brought him over now. Come on, Vivian, and before you know it, you'll be Mrs. Rialto."

"And what about your other wife—back in Kansas?" Vivian flashed, then could have bitten her tongue to keep the words back.

Rialto's face darkened.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Wife in Kansas? I haven't any wife, there or anywhere else."

The fear that had been choking her blazed suddenly into defiance.

"So you don't know what I'm talking about?" she mocked. "Well, I do happen to know—and if you think that I'd marry you now, then you can think again! Get out of my house, Burch Rialto, and stay out!"

"Not so fast, now!" Truculence rasped in Rialto's voice. He was playing it dangerously close now, and he knew it, and fear drove him to desperation, ripped away the cloak. "You're getting too high and mighty for my taste, just lately, but I'll know how to deal with that! And as to not marrying me—guess again!"

He strode forward, completely disregarding the parson, halted in front of her.

"I don't know how much you know, but it seems like you've been findin' out some things about me. That's why I'm here now—and why

I've been takin' a few precautions. If you find out something about me, you'd better learn a few things about that brother George of yore's, too. Oh, I know why you promised to marry me in the first place—you were scart about the truth. Well, it's worse than you figured. He's been helpin' with these robberies that the town is so stirred up about. Enough to put his neck in a noose. But lately he's been gettin' notions like you, too. He had the nerve to tell me where I could go to, today, and said he was going to hunt up the sheriff and tell him some things, then take whatever consequences came along! The fool!"

The recklessness of Rialto's words now testified to his desperation.

"Folks don't double-cross me," he went on grimly. "Not and live to get away with it. Right now, George is out at the cabin, with a couple of my friends keepin' an eye on him. If I get out there by mornin', or send word that you're my wife, then he'll know enough to keep his mouth shut, and things 'll be all right. But if that word don't get there by sun-up—then they're going to string yore brother up to that cottonwood that grows a little way off from the cabin! And plant enough evidence to make everybody glad he's been hung."

Vivian's face was dead white now, her hands still at her throat. Rialto's brows lifted in a mocking grin.

"You can open yore prayer-book and get on with it, parson," he said. "She won't make any objection. Tie the knot good an' tight."

Parsons had watched with an expressionless face. Now, woodenly, he fumbled in his coat pocket, drew out a black covered book and riffled through it hesitantly, while Rialto took his stand beside the girl. The parson cleared his throat.

"Now that we're gathered here for this ceremony of gettin' hitched—he began.

"That's a mistake, I think!" The voice was pleasant, but at sound of it Vivian gasped, and Rialto made a quick clutch toward his holstered gun, then stopped the motion in mid-air and slowly raised his hands, staring into the muzzle of the gun in Chinook's hand. Chinook stood there at the door of a side room, and Vivian saw that he must have come into that other room through the same window from which she had watched, earlier in the evening. The parson looked dumbfounded, and the prayer-book dropped from his nerveless hand.

"Just keep that pose, Rialto," Chinook said, and noted that Vivian, now that he could see her for the first time, was rather small in build, but spirited like a fine horse, with brown-gold hair above a slightly up-tilted nose, and steady blue eyes.

"You'd better take his gun, Miss Vivian," Chinook advised. "Just to be on the safe side."

He watched while she disarmed both men, doing it with the same coolness which she had shown in coming into the jail to free him. Then he stooped and picked up the dropped book, started to hand it back to the pastor, and checked the gesture.

"Prayer-book, eh?" he asked quizzically. "Seems to be a book of rules for card games, if I can read straight. Funny thing for a sky pilot to conduct a wedding-service from, isn't it now? But then, since there's not going to be any wedding, it doesn't make much difference. Though there are some folks in this town who'll likely be plenty interested in the story."

His manner changed abruptly.

"If you'll get some rope, Miss Vivian, so we can tie them up, then we'll get on with things, so that there'll be no trouble in getting out to that cabin, before morning. And speaking of a rope, Rialto, you're going to be at the end of your rope, right soon now—a rope with a knot in the end of it."

Vivian turned to obey. But in that moment Parsons, who had made no protest before, came suddenly to life. He spun about, and had her in his arms before she could do more than gasp, then, holding her in front of him as a shield, jumped and blew out the lamp with one puff of breath.

There was a moment of wild confusion, running feet, a slamming door. Because of the girl, Chinook dared not use his gun. Then he heard her voice, crossed to him in the dark.

"They—they've gotten away," she gasped.

"It seems so," Chinook agreed. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm all right," she insisted. "But now they'll head right for that cabin, and they'll kill George—"

"He'll be all right," Chinook reassured her. "He'll be a lot more valuable to Rialto alive than dead, the way things are working out." He found a match, lit the lamp again, taking the precaution to pull down the shade. Vivian watched him with growing interest. He voiced no recriminations or complaints, despite the escape of Rialto. Instead, to her surprise, he was half-grinning at her, rather hungrily.

"I doubt if we'll be bothered for a while now," he said. "And if we are—well, I could do better on a good meal. I haven't had a bite since morning, and that was a long time ago. I'm already in your debt, for gettin' me out of jail. But if it wouldn't be askin' too much—"

Vivian laughed a little, shakily.

"You certainly paid that back, and then some," she said. "I'll rustle you up something to eat, right away."

Outside, it was still raining monotonously, but here it was warm and cheerful. For the moment, Chinook preferred to relax. With Rialto still on the loose, there would be plenty more to do, soon enough. But a little rest would do him a lot of good.

Vivian hurried out to the kitchen, and Chinook sank into a chair, then arose and picked something off the floor.

"Here's a letter addressed to you," he said, frowning at it, puzzled. "Looks kind of wet—and like it had had some usage—"

"A letter?" Vivian placed a steaming platter on the table, turned, as puzzled as he was. "I don't understand—" She took it, frowned at it a moment, pulled out a thin sheet of paper, or a part of a sheet, for most of this, Chinook saw, was missing. And the letter had been torn roughly open.

"Why, I never saw this before," she said. "I don't understand—it doesn't make sense—"

She held it out toward him, what was left of the sheet. As he took it, Chinook began to understand. Part of the envelope was gone, as well as a good part of the letter itself—looking almost as if it had been burned.

"I'm thinkin' maybe I begin to understand," he said slowly. "Like I said before, I brought a pouch of mail here from Landmark. And Wilcox, or Rialto, or whatever his name is, tried to rob me of the mail, once today. Tonight he helped himself to the pouch, of course, found what he wanted in it, then had somebody else deliver the pouch. This must be it. It's wet, like he'd been carryin' it, and he dropped it in here—or maybe the parson dropped it, out of that so-called prayer-book of his."

"But it looks as if it had been burnt—"

"Yeah. A bullet aimed at me kind of went astray and bit the pouch. Seems to've smeared this letter up some. Now, Rialto figured this was important enough to murder for. Let's see what it is, anyhow."

There were only a few lines which had not been destroyed. But they were mysterious enough.

*"To Miss Vivian Ford, from a Friend: If you would right an old wrong, and find something good for yourself at the same time, then go to . . . Many Smokes . . . the Saddle tells. . . ."*

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*Chapter VI*

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THE REST of the letter had been smeared or burned away so that it was completely illegible. If this was the prize that Rialto had been so desperately eager to get hold of, then Fate had dealt ironically with him. For it had been his own bullet which had struck this letter and made it worthless.

"You any idea what it's all about?" Chinook asked.

"Not the faintest," Vivian denied, frowning over the fragment again. "I never heard of any such things."

"Well, I don't think that letter helped Rialto much," Chinook commented. "But it's a cinch that it's something big, and he got on the trail of it. Maybe that's why he was so anxious to marry you, so as to get his hands on it for sure."

"Well, you'd better eat your supper," the girl reminded him. "You said you were hungry."

"And I meant it," Chinook grinned. He fell to with a hearty appetite, curiously uplifted. This was the end of the trail, in one sense, for he had found Rialto. And had stepped, from the look of it, into far more trouble than he had figured on. He didn't understand himself nor his mood. The fact that he was warm and fed could account for a part of it, but not all. But he wasn't thinking of that part of it.

"Where is this cabin?" he asked. "I'll ride up there and have a look."

"It's about five miles from here, up near the head of a canyon," Vivian explained, and gave directions. "I—it's good of you to do all this, for me."

"I'm doing part of it on my own account," Chinook reminded her.

"I know," she said. "I—I'm sorry that I said what I did—tonight. I—suppose you loved her—a lot?"

"Amy, you mean?" Chinook looked at the floor, looked at Vivian, then out at the blackly wet night. "I guess I did," he agreed. "But that was a long time ago. If you get a chance to tell the truth, about me, to some of the folks around here, in the morning, it might be a good idea. And keep your doors and windows barred tonight. I don't think Rialto will dare return—but it's as well to be on the safe side."

He found his horse, left all this time to stand neglected in the rain,

swung grimly to the saddle. Rialto was a far more dangerous man than he had given him credit for in the first place, a man without scruple but with plenty of cunning.

Finding the cabin was not difficult, even at night. But as he had expected, it was deserted now. Whoever had been there earlier in the night was gone now. So far as Vivian's brother was concerned, Chinook wasn't worried on his account, for the immediate future. With his plans miscarrying, Rialto would want George Ford kept alive.

Chinook brought his horse inside the cabin as well, since it was usually untenanted. An old bunk had a couple of blankets in it, however, and he rolled up in them, slept. Sunlight came in at a dirty window when he awoke, and a look around by daylight disclosed some dry beans and a few canned goods in a little cupboard, and from these latter he breakfasted.

This was a vastly different country than he had looked out on the day before. Here were good-sized hills, though the mountains proper were still some distance on to the north and west. The country hereabouts had a deserted look, and hoof-tracks had been pretty well washed away by the rain, since the other occupants of the cabin had left it so hastily.

The best thing, Chinook decided, would be to return to Moccasin and make a fresh start from there. If he could get various things straightened out, and there should be little trouble about that, it would help a lot.

Vivian should already have gone a long way in that direction. With daylight to cool their passions, and the story that she would tell, the townsfolk would soon be brought to their senses. And when the law was after Rialto, it would at least be more comfortable.

Ahead was a tangle of fir and aspen, with clumps of service-berry and thorn apple, clutching rose briars. Not far away, a little creek fell in a succession of cascades in its hurry to get somewhere else making a lot of noise about it. Chinook's horse pushed into a little open glade, and stopped instinctively. Just as instinctively, Chinook's hand went for his gun.

There were four men here, and one of them wore the badge of a deputy sheriff. Right now, he was stretched on the ground, tied hand and foot. And one look at his captors was enough to convince Chinook that here were some of the outlaws who had been helping Rialto terrorize this section of country.

One was heavy-shouldered, like a grizzly bear, a shambling hulk of a man with a scar making a pucker like a dimple in his right cheek,

as though a knife had bitten deep there, down to the bone. The second was a little man with a huge nose, while the third limped from a once-broken foot which now toed awkwardly outward.

"Best way's to kill him—" the big man was saying, when he halted and swung about at Chinook's sudden approach. All three grabbed for their guns, then checked the motions reluctantly as they saw that he had them covered. Slowly, under the menace of his gun, they raised their hands, alertly watchful. The big man tried to smile ingratiatingly then.

"Well, boys will yuh look who's here?" he said. "Guess our luck ain't so bad, after all. Yuh can holster that hawg-leg, feller. We're friends, though of course we don't blame yuh none for being careful. Payin' proposition, sometimes."

Chinook's gun did not waver.

"You're plumb right there, amigo," he agreed. "Furnishes a good talking-point."

"Sure it does," the outlaw agreed readily. "But we're all in the same boat. You'll be this Chinook that the law's huntin' so hard. That's what this hombre was doing, I reckon—" he gestured contemptuously toward the prone figure of the deputy sheriff. "Huntin' you, I guess, when he run into us, sort of by accident. But we don't have no use for his kind. We was just debatin' whether to string him up, or save trouble by shootin' him."

"I'll save you the trouble of deciding," Chinook said. "Let him go."

"Let him go?" the big-nosed man squalled angrily. "Are you crazy? It was you he was after. Anyway, when we catch a law-dog, we treat him like they'd treat us if they could. We ain't lettin' him go."

"Sure you won't change your mind about that?" Chinook asked softly, but there was something in his smile that seemed to chill the trio as much as the black muzzle of his gun. The big man spoke up hastily.

"Why, sure we will, Chinook, if that's the way yuh feel about it," he agreed. "It's plumb foolish, but the feller with the gun always has the say."

"Mebbe I spoke too hasty," Big Nose nodded. "We'll make an exception in this case."

"Then cut him loose," Chinook ordered.

"Sure we will. But you holster that hawg-leg," Big Nose snarled. "We're all in one boat, and if we're going to be friends—"

"We aren't going to be friends," Chinook informed them. "Cut him loose. And keep your hands away from your guns."

They obeyed in a seething anger, while Chinook watched them

sharply, debating what to do. If he gave them the slightest chance now, he knew that they would treat him as they had been about to treat the deputy. These men, more likely than not, belonged to Rialto's organization, for how else could they have known so much about him so swiftly?

The question was what to do with them. His inclination was to take them in and turn them over to the law. But a glance at the deputy showed that he had been hard used. He seemed dazed, barely able to stand. To try and take him in, and watch them at the same time, would be more than a job. Still, he'd have to essay it—

"Mebbe we better call it a draw, eh, hombre?" the man with the twisted foot suggested softly, and added casually, "I could kill you where you stand—but Killer Kurtch wouldn't like it if you killed him at the same time, so—this time—let's just call it a draw."

Startled, Chinook saw that the man wasn't lying. Even with his eyes on him, he had produced a gun like a trick of legerdemain, evidently shaking it down into his hand from some sort of a spring-clip arrangement hidden in his sleeve. Kurtch, the big man, grunted approval.

"That's usin' sense, Rattlesnake!"

"All right," Chinook agreed. "Get on your horses and ride. We'll call it a draw."

"This time," Rattlesnake added, softly.

"Yeah, this time," Chinook agreed, and knew that he had added three to his list of enemies.

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## Chapter VII

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THE DEPUTY was getting unsteadily to his feet as the three rode out of sight. His horse stood not far off, and Chinook brought it up for him.

"I'll help you back to town," he said. "You look like you'd been hard used."

The deputy mounted, with his assistance, managed a ghastly smile.

"I'll be all right, now," he said. "I can make it—all right, by

myself. If you're Chinook—you'd better hit the trail. I—won't be forgettin' this. But I'm—only one."

"But I'm no outlaw," Chinook protested. "And I want to tell my story. I—"

"My boss—Sheriff Barkley—is a right good man," the deputy explained diffidently. "But plenty stubborn. You'll do better to keep out of sight a spell. I'll be all right."

Puzzled, Chinook allowed him to ride away, clutching the saddle-horn tight with one hand. Evidently the trio had hit him over the head, and he was still in bad shape, but game. If he preferred it that way, then Chinook resolved to follow along at some distance behind, keeping out of sight, to make sure that he got back to town all right. For, whatever the deputy's opinion, Chinook intended to go back to Moccasin as well.

He had ridden less than a mile when the wisdom of this course became apparent. From a quarter of a mile ahead, a running horse, riderless, broke out of a patch of brush, and he recognized it as the deputy's cayuse. Three minutes later, Chinook found him, and this situation was fully as bad as the one in which Chinook had found him before.

The deputy lay, partly sprawled on the grass, partly sitting up, his face gray and twisted with sweat and agony. His right leg was curiously twisted too, proof that it had been broken below the knee. But that was not the worst, as Chinook saw.

The injured man had jerked up his chaps, on his left leg. And there, on the lower ankle, was plainly visible a growing swelling, and among the discolored flesh Chinook could see two reddish marks, as though sharp knives had been jabbed viciously into the leg. But Chinook knew them for what they were—the punctures of a rattlesnake's fangs!

Startled, the deputy looked up at his approach, and a little of the gray hopelessness left his face as he recognized Chinook again. He even contrived a rather ghastly grin.

"Johnny on the spot when yo're needed, ain't you, feller?" he asked. "Guess I was a fool—but I won't be forgettin' you."

"How did it happen?" Chinook asked, and opened the knife which he carried, running a testing thumb along the keen blade.

The deputy eyed the knife for a moment, as if fascinated.

"My cayuse got right in between a pair of 'em, 'fore it saw them," he explained. "It went crazy wild then, and jumped—threw me off. Busted my leg as I hit, and one of the rattlers struck me."

Chinook knelt down, removing his neckerchief and twisting it into a loose cord, then knotting it around the leg, just above the knee. He found a stick to make a tourniquet, and talked as he did so.

"You're havin' plenty of bad luck, all in a bunch," he said. "That's the way it comes, sometimes."

"Yeah," the officer agreed. "Though it could be worse, at that. I had one good break lately."

"This'll hurt," Chinook warned, picking up the knife. "But I got to do it. What good luck was that?"

"Go ahead," the deputy agreed gamely. "I thought Vivian Ford was going to marry that damn Rialto today, but she's through with him. Mebbe leave a chance for me, yet."

"Mebbe it does," Chinook nodded, and kept his own voice even. "Hold steady now, feller. It won't take long."

The deputy groaned, once, as Chinook slashed around the fang-marks to induce bleeding, then relaxed, and Chinook saw that he had fainted. Chinook set his mouth to the wound and sucked out as much poison as possible. He spat it out, glanced at the hot sun overhead, and stood up.

Here was one lucky break—that the injured man had fainted. For he would have to get him water, before he could do anything more. There was water perhaps a quarter of a mile away. But before he could move him that far, that other, broken leg, would have to be splinted.

Choke-cherries grew in a thick clump near at hand, the fruit beginning to redden. Chinook cut a splint, then braced himself to give a pull on the leg and set it in place, a task which started the sweat on his own face. But he'd helped with such jobs more than once, and knew pretty well how to do them. He tore the injured man's coat to strips and used it for padding and bandages, and was just completing the job when the deputy's eyes opened again.

"I'll soon have you in town, now, and better help," Chinook said. "You'll come out all right, feller."

"They sure had you all wrong, there in town," the sick man said gratefully. "And I'll tell 'em so."

"Going to be a bit rough, now, till we get there," Chinook warned. "But you've shown plenty of spunk."

He was lifting the deputy into his own saddle when two men rode out from behind the brush, guns on him. One of them, he knew at a glance, was the sheriff, a granite-faced man who was wide from the ground up. The other was a second deputy.

"Take it easy, Chinook," the sheriff warned harshly. "What you been doing to Tom Mobray?"

It was Mobray who opened his eyes and answered.

"He's been helpin' me when I needed it bad, Barkley," he explained. "I got a busted leg, and was struck by a rattler in the bargain. Chinook stopped to help me, and that ain't all—"

"A man would be a plumb yellow dog that wouldn't help you, in a fix like that," Barkley said shortly. "But sentiment don't have any place in the law business. Bank robbin' and murder is too ugly to overlook. Put the bracelets on him, Jem."

While the sheriff talked, Jem had kept Chinook covered. Now he reached into a coat pocket and drew out a pair of handcuffs.

"How about giving me a chance to tell my story, before you go jumpin' at conclusions, Sheriff?" Chinook asked. "Haven't I earned that right?"

"You can tell your story to the judge," Barkley said uncompromisingly. "I'll see you get a chance to do it, with no try at lynchin' like they was talkin' of last night when I was out of town. But my job's to bring you in."

The handcuffs clicked shut. Tom Mobray roused indignantly.

"Listen, Barkley," he said. "You ain't being fair. Let me tell you—"

"You ain't in no shape to judge things correct—or to do any talkin' now, either," Barkley overrode him. "We'll be getting started for town, get you to a medico, fast as we can. Help me lift him easy, Jem—"

"That's it, law-dogs! Hold him gentle! Don't drop him now, whatever you do. It might kill both of you if you did!"

The harshly mocking voice of Killer Kurtch didn't greatly surprise Chinook, but it froze the pair of them in their tracks, as the outlaw trio stepped into sight. Kurtch was grinning wolfishly.

"If you'd let yore deputy do a little talkin', like he was startin' to, 'stead of knowin' it all yoreself, Sheriff, mebbe we wouldn't have surprised you so complete," he chuckled. "We met up with him before—and with this other hombre! Been kind of taggin' along, havin' a bone to pick with the bunch of you. Besides, it's always safer to be chasin' them that's mebbe after you, than hustlin' to keep ahead of 'em!"

He looked at Chinook, and malevolence flared redly in his eyes.

"So they put the bracelets on you, did they?" he asked. "My, my! What a plumb ungrateful way of treatin' a man who's just helped one of their breed out of a right bad fix. That won't do. Won't do

a-tall. Big Nose, find the key and unlock them handcuffs. Then put 'em on the sheriff. It's more fitting that he should wear 'em. And tie this hombre's hands behind his back."

"Aw, why bother with tyin' him?" the little outlaw snarled. "Why not plug him and be done with it?"

"Yore methods are too crude, Big Nose," the Killer chided. "We don't get many chances like this, to deal with three law-dogs and another hombre that's made a fool of us. We got a reputation as being good ones to let alone—special for law-dogs. Scares most of 'em off from tryin' very hard to meet up with us. And after we deal with this bunch, why, most folks 'll run when they even hear our names whispered."

Chinook was beginning to remember, now. Big Nose, Killer Kurtch, the Rattlesnake—members of an owlhoot gang who were brutal, sadistic killers, who deliberately tortured their victims to enhance their own reputation, for the reason which Kurtch had stated. Yes, he'd heard tell of these men, even across a thousand miles of country.

"You got a scheme?" Big Nose asked.

"You thick-headed gun-toter! You bet I got a scheme—best way to kill coyotes I ever did think of! And so Mobray got himself bit by a rattler, eh?" He turned to the silently watchful Rattlesnake, and a look of understanding seemed to pass between the two of them, without any words being spoken.

"Think you can rustle up what we need for this job?" Kurtch asked.

Rattlesnake nodded, ejecting a brown blob of tobacco juice.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I'll have what we need, time you're ready, Killer."

He turned and hurried out of sight, going eagerly, like a hound on a fresh scent. Jem's hands had been tied behind his back with a length of rope, like those of Chinook, while the sheriff wore his own handcuffs. Now the Killer and Big Nose proceeded with the plan which Kurtch had evolved. As he began gradually to understand what the Killer had in mind, Chinook's blood grew cold.

They had traveled only a few hundred feet to a spot which Kurtch had apparently had in mind. Here, along the base of a hill, was a narrow, sloping ledge of rock—six to ten feet above the meadow, the ledge jutting out above a pathway which was only two or three feet wide. Behind the path, the ledge rose straight and sheer again.

A tall pine tree grew at the foot of the hill, with a great outthrusting

branch near the top of the slope, which jutted out across that narrow ledge path.

The three able-bodied captives were herded on to the path by Big Nose, with a finger which trembled on the trigger. Kurtch himself picked Tom Mobray up in his arms and carried him, since he could not walk. Chinook was first in line, herded to stand below the big tree, with Jem behind him, then the sheriff, and half a dozen feet separating each of them. The injured deputy was placed behind the sheriff, and left to sit there, too sick and pain-wracked to take much interest in what was going on. Though he, like the others, save for the handcuffed Barkley, had his hands tied behind his back.

Chinook had endured in grim-lipped silence, twisting at his bonds whenever a chance offered. The knots had been tied tightly enough, but that didn't much worry him. In San Francisco, he'd helped guard prisoners for the Vigilantes, had learned a few tricks from another guard, who had served at one time on a whaling ship.

"If ye know how to hold yer wrists, ye can slip out of nine out of ten knots, easy as fallin' off a log," he had assured Chinook, and had demonstrated the trick of it. "Watch these by's now, that some of thim don't try it, and be featherin' a blade between our shoulders before we know it."

Chinook had not forgotten the knack of it. And this rope had been tied by an amateur, however tightly. He saw now that with another good twist he could free his hands. But getting them loose would be folly, until he saw some sort of a chance. And under the watchful eye and trembling trigger-finger of Big Nose, chances could be plenty scarce.

There was more than murder involved here, he figured. These men were working under the orders of Rialto. If he could be disposed of in such fashion, and the law, which, however dumb, was plainly stubborn and not to be bribed, wiped out along with him, then, despite what had happened in town the night before, Rialto intended to force Vivian to marry him, and to dominate the town and community. Whatever stakes he was playing for, the man was relentless, unyielding.

They stood now, lined on the narrow cliff trail, the sheer drop-off of ten feet below them, the equally sheer cliff rising up beside them. The Killer returned again, carrying the lariat ropes from their saddles. His voice was mockingly jovial.

"I've always wanted to be present at the hangin' of a bunch of law-dogs," he said. "This sure affords me a lot of pleasure. Big Nose, you get up there and fix these ropes."

Big Nose obeyed, climbing the pine tree, tying the ends of the ropes to various convenient branches. Then the nooses were adjusted, each in turn, over the heads of the four men on the pathway. A little slack was left in each rope, but not much.

Chinook believed that he understood the Killer's plan. They would simply be kicked off the ledge trail, to dangle there in space and slowly strangle to death. Unless they chose to jump, so that the leap would snap their necks and end it more swiftly.

Then he saw that he had guessed only a part of it. Kurtch, in pursuance of his terroristic plan, had a far more unpleasant scheme in mind than merely for them to hang. He had gotten more ropes, and now proceeded to use these, with the four prisoners spaced as they were, with an interval between each of them.

One length of rope was tied around the waist of Chinook, running back to a loose noose around the ankles of Jem—fastened so that it could not fall off his feet or be kicked loose. A similar rope led from Jem's waist to the ankles of the sheriff, and another rope from Barkley to Tom Mobray.

"Here's the idea," Kurtch explained. "When you get tired of standin' there, Chinook, you can remember how you made us eat crow, and jump,—which'll hang you nice. And when yuh jumps that rope around yore waist 'll jerk Jem off, lynchin' him—and he'll drag the sheriff off, and Barkley 'll pull Mobray off. So all four of you can hang together. And because of what yuh done to us, and likewise because yuh helped a law-dog out, you'll have the pleasure of hangin' all them law-dogs, Chinook."

"Do you think I'll take that jump in the first place—unless you shove me?" Chinook demanded.

"We don't aim to shove yuh," Kurtch purred. "This is all going to be done plumb voluntary. You'll be killin' them, not us. But I'm willin' to bet—say yore neck on it—that you'll be jumpin' right sudden, and doing it without no push from us."

"I got what yuh wanted, Killer." That was Rattlesnake's voice, a bit shrill with excitement. He appeared, limping a little, gingerly clutching a squirming gunny-sack in one hand, which he now tendered to Kurtch. The Killer drew back, shaking his head violently, and pointed instead to the cliff rearing above them.

"Fine," he agreed. "Slide it right down behind Chinook's heels, there."

Big Nose, with his rope-tying finished, had descended again to stand at the foot of the path, below and a little in front of Chinook,

where he could obtain the best view. Kurtch took up a stand near him. Rattlesnake circled and climbed to the top of the ledge, opened his sack and shook out something, and as the writhing mass plummeted to the path just behind him, Chinook understood.

It was a big, diamond-backed rattler, which Rattlesnake had captured, and now, thoroughly angry at the mistreatment it had received, the big reptile was coiling, just behind Chinook, and beginning already to sound its blood-chilling warning, preparatory to striking.

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## Chapter VIII

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CHINOOK tensed. If he moved, he had no choice but to jump. Any attempt to run would tighten the noose around his neck and jerk him off the path. And if he stood still—that was something which the Killer had figured would be impossible, in a natural revulsion against the coiling reptile.

From Kurtch's scheme, it was perfect. One that couldn't fail.

And then, swiftly, Chinook was doing the one thing which Kurtch had been positive that he would never do. Even as he wrenched his hands loose from the rope which held them behind his back, then reached up in almost the same motion to throw the noose off from about his throat, Chinook was doing the only thing which could possibly save the lives of his three star-toting companions—deliberately kicking back at the big diamond-backed rattler with one leg, so that all six horror-struck watchers saw it strike and then strive to coil around his ankle.

In that last purpose the rattler failed, for Chinook's kick sent the snake twisting and writhing down through the air, full into the startled face of Killer Kurtch.

With a shrill howl of terror, the Killer leaped back, clawing it off him, and giving it no time to strike again, though in his frenzy he probably believed that it had already bitten him. Then he was running, wildly, while Chinook, pausing only long enough to jerk loose the rope around his ankles which connected him with Jem, leaped out and down—landing on top of the startled Big Nose, flattening him to the ground.

Rattlesnake, up above, had witnessed the mad flight of Kurtch, the

downfall of Big Nose, and he stayed for no more. By the time that Chinook could get to his feet, with Big Nose's gun in his hand, the two outlaws had reached their horses and were in wild flight.

Taking time to truss Big Nose, Chinook lost no time in releasing the other three. The sheriff stared at him a little wildly.

"Where was yuh bit?" he asked.

"Bit?" Chinook stared, then grinned. "The rattler just hit my boot. Didn't touch me."

"Which is sure lucky. Mebby you won't want to shake hands—I sure wouldn't blame you. But Tom said you were all right—and I reckon you are. Anyway, I'm apologizin'."

Chinook grasped the proffered hand heartily.

"We'd better get Tom in to town," he said. "I'll tell you my story on the way."

He did so, and knew that he had the law on his side now. They hurried Mobray to the lone medico, who pronounced that Chinook's measures had saved his life. He'd be a sick man for a while, and compelled to stay in bed till his broken leg healed, but he would recover.

With Big Nose lodged in jail, Chinook lost no time in reporting to Vivian. As he had more than half expected, her brother had not returned, nor had she heard anything of him. And with Rialto now openly proclaimed an outlaw, and feeling running strong against him in the revulsion, that was not so good.

"I've got an idea," Chinook said. "Big Nose might know something. If I can get him to talk."

His hunch, he knew, had been correct. Big Nose's eyes dilated a little when Chinook mentioned the name, then he shook his head sullenly.

"I don't know a thing," he protested. "Not a thing."

"No?" Chinook smiled, grimly. "I've just talked with the sheriff, and he's as interested as I am. And he hasn't forgotten that little scheme you fixed up for all of us. Either you talk—or else I'm going to turn a few rattlers loose in this cell with you. He said I could go as far as I liked."

Big Nose hesitated, his face turning almost green. Then he came to his feet.

"All I know is, that Rialto's tryin' to get hold of the Kid's ranch," he said. "Ghost Ranch. And he's got some scheme for doing it, tonight—down at Birdseye. Likely Ford'll be there, too. That's all I know, honest."

That, at least, was something. Chinook had a feeling that Big Nose was telling the truth. Birdseye, the sheriff explained, was a squalid little town, a score of miles away. He offered to ride there with Chinook.

"I think I'd better go alone," Chinook decided. "Be more likely to find out things—and I'm afraid Ford's life is at stake. What's this Ghost Ranch, anyhow? Is it worth a lot?"

The sheriff shook his head.

"I wouldn't think so," he denied. "Ranch back in the mountains, and there used to be a small minin' town on it—ghost town now. Ranch run to rack and ruin. Hasn't been used for years. I guess George inherited it, but he'd of sold it for most any price. No good for anything. I can't figure what Rialto'd want of it."

Vivian confirmed the sheriff's judgment. Ghost Ranch was too high up in the mountains, too cold and barren, to be any good, save as a summer pasture. It had not been used for years for any purpose.

"If Rialto had tried to buy it, even a little while ago, I'm sure that he could have had it for almost any price," she said. "But now—George may have gotten the idea that there's something to it, and since he's tried to break with Rialto, he probably refuses to sell it at all."

That, Chinook guessed, was where the danger lay. Whatever Rialto was after, he was playing a desperate game now, and would stop at nothing.

"I'll head for Birdseye and see what I can find," he said. "And I'll try and do a better job than I did last night."

"You did all that anybody could do, last night," Vivian said warmly. "And from what I hear, you've had a busy day, too. You—you'll be careful, Chinook?"

"I'll aim to be," Chinook agreed. "There's a double purpose in this trip. I want to find Rialto as well as George."

But he was warmed by Vivian's concern as he rode away. It was a score of miles to Birdseye, and he aimed to reach it by nightfall. Presently, however, the sky grew overcast again, and he knew that he might be in for another wetting. It seemed to rain easy and often, this season.

But the storm held off until he finally sighted the town, tucked down in a narrow valley between high hills. Then the early darkness was punctuated by flashes of lightning, and the rain, to the drumbeat of thunder, began its march—no gentle storm, but a pounding downpour which volleyed and drove like the clashing thunder. The dark swirled

down, and Chinook saw that if he rode on in to town he would be soaked before he could reach a livery stable.

Close at hand loomed the dark open door of what looked like a deserted shed. He turned his horse in through it, dismounted back in the musty interior, and walked back to the door to look out again. But it was too dark to see much, save during the revealing lightning flashes, which were so sharp as to hurt the eyes.

Abruptly he stiffened. Someone had just ducked around the corner and inside the shack as well. Chinook felt, rather than saw him, crouching there almost beside him, and he saw that the newcomer had a gun in his hand.

"You're plenty slow in gettin' here," the man growled at Chinook. Then, before he could answer, he went on swiftly.

"It's all set. Ford's in the saloon across there. He won't sell—but he's scared to go back to Moccasin. Well, he won't go back—ever." He laughed softly in his throat, a thoroughly unpleasant sound.

"The boss has got it fixed up. If Ford's dead, he won't raise no ruckus about his ranch. So we'll bump him off. And see that you do a good job. Here's the way it shapes:

"Ford's in the saloon, like I said. There'll be you and me and Hobe to do the job, so we won't have any trouble. We can't count on the bartender helpin' much. Hobe'll be at the back door. I'll be loungin' by the bar, and you drift in from the front. You'll spot Ford easy, with that big white hat he wears. We'll have him pocketed, of course—but remember that he's fast as forked lightnin' with a gun, besides which he's jittery and proddy lately. So don't give him no chance. As soon as this rain slacks off a little, you drift down there. We'll work it, then head for the boss's place. It'll rain more or less all night. Get it?"

"Yeah, I got it," Chinook grunted, and his hand closed on the butt of his forty-five. But before he could act, the other man had slipped away like a shadow in the gloom and was gone.

Chinook considered the matter. Evidently they had turned Ford loose, after failing to get him to do as they wished. Probably Rialto had attempted to make him believe that he was his friend. That had failed, and now, using tools whenever possible, Rialto had determined on murder once more.

In the darkness, this other hombre had mistaken him for someone who was supposed to come here to help with the job. Well, he'd certainly take a hand, all right—though maybe not quite in the way they planned!

The first fury of the storm was slackening now, and dimly, through the misty night, as a door was opened farther down the street, on the opposite side, the light glow revealed the sign: *Empire Saloon*. Chinook left his horse, slipped out into the gloom.

It was fifty-fifty whether anyone here would know him, but this Hobe and the other killer would probably not be long in deciding that he wasn't their partner in crime. His best chance to save George Ford was to make them believe, for a little while at least, that he was just a stranger who had stepped in for a drink. But it might be close.

He pushed open the door of the Empire, stepped through, and closed it behind him again. It was a big saloon, but perhaps because of the storm, almost deserted. The bartender, who apparently had foreknowledge of the intended killing, lurked in his alley like a nervous coyote behind a hen-house, uneasily wiping and polishing at an already clean surface, his eyes roving jerkily toward a small table at the far side of the room, where a man whom Chinook recognized instantly as being Vivian's brother, sat alone and stared moodily at an untasted drink.

George Ford looked a lot like his sister, save that he had a weak, rather petulant mouth. He was almost too good looking for a man, but according to all reports he had discovered the sort of thing that he was being led into, and had revolted, even knowing, as he did, that it might be dangerous business. Now he was apparently at a cross-roads, through with the one trail, hardly daring to try and go back to the old life. But plainly with no intimation that he had been marked for death.

The bartender's eyes shuttled to Chinook and back again, but there was no change in his face, so it was apparent that he did not know the man whose place Chinook was taking. And neither, apparently, had Hobe seen anything suspicious, so far. He was a tall, stooped hombre, with a face like a fox.

The man who had talked to Chinook was the only other one in the saloon. He'd have to make them believe that he was just a stranger, wandering in here for a drink, until he could somehow warn Ford of his peril.

Chinook flipped his last remaining piece of change on the bar, poured out a drink, and tasted it. Then, as though absent-mindedly, he moved a few steps down the bar, toward Ford.

The pair of gunmen stiffened a little, watching him, and the bartender was like a fly on a hot stove, jerky and undecided. Only Ford still appeared to have no inkling of what was building up. But in that moment there were footsteps on the wet board walk outside, then, behind him, Chinook heard the door open and close again.

He knew from the look, on the faces of the two, that this was the man they expected. Only his presence now complicated the murder plot. They exchanged glances, significantly, and he could tell that they were aiming to go through with it—and if he got in the way, another killing, of a stranger, wouldn't matter to them.

Chinook felt the short hairs at the base of his scalp prickle as he walked ahead, there was a constriction in the pit of his stomach. For this was dynamite—and if it went off, he was pocketed between three or four guns now, the same as Ford.

All of them were watching him now, still undecided, not quite sure of him or what he planned to do—but if their suspicions crystallized before he reached Ford, neither the owner of Ghost Ranch nor himself would have half the chance of a snowball, bounding downhill in the infernal regions.

Chinook noted that only two big coal-oil lamps were lit. That wasn't so bad. But the pair of gunmen ahead of him had gone into a half-crouch now, ready for action, waiting for whatever might come—equally ready to blast at Ford or himself, and highly suspicious of him. And now, for the first time, Ford was rousing a little from his reverie, beginning to take notice, sensing that something was wrong.

Hand close to his gun-butt, Chinook looked, not at Ford, but toward the two gunmen. He spoke swiftly, softly, from the side of his mouth, not slowing his pace.

"They aim to kill you, Ford. Take the lamp over the bar—I'll blast out the other one."

He knew that the pair hadn't been able to hear what he said, but something had decided them, with suspicions already at a hair-trigger. Both of them were going for their guns.

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## Chapter IX

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CHINOOK saw the startled look on Ford's face, the swift comprehension, then Ford was acting, flinging himself back from his chair and sidewise, going for his own gun. Chinook's was already blasting, while he made a big leap sidewise, like a frog where a mink had suddenly appeared.

Even so, it was close. Chinook heard the roaring thunder of guns from two sides blending into a death-song with his own, heard the venomous whine of a bullet past his ear, then both lights went out almost together. His own bullet had found its mark, and Ford had done as well. The boy could grasp a situation and act fast.

Chinook expelled his breath. The dark at least gave them a chance. But the odds were still against them, and these killers would be doubly determined now to wind up the thing they had started.

For a moment, following the shouting of the guns, there was a stifled sort of silence as the dark closed down. In it, Chinook could hear the tensely repressed breathing of some man, the scrape of a boot, and smell the tingling tang of gunsmoke against the staler odors of tobacco and old whisky.

Then lightning flashed once more from outside—a long, horizon-splitting gash of it, which for a space of seconds made the whole room weirdly light, and showed Ford almost beside him. It revealed the two of them to the others as well, and as the darkness rolled back again, guns were trying to make their puny sound carry against the thunder which rolled on the lightning's heels, gun-flashes were lancing in feeble imitation of that other lightning.

But there was nothing feeble about those powder-driven bullets, and there was a satisfying buck to the gun in his own hand as he drove back a shot at one of the gun-flashes, and heard a yell which showed that he hadn't wasted his lead. Ford was returning their fire as well, then, with more lead still questing for them, Chinook was running for that back door, and he sensed rather than saw that Ford was beside him.

One final, thin flash of lightning made a momentary glow inside the room, showing Chinook the door just ahead, and one of the trio guarding it, gun half-lifted. Chinook swiped his gun-barrel across the guard's skull, then he and Ford were outside, into the rain-drenched night.

"This way," Ford ordered, and Chinook followed. Behind them, he heard the door open again, the frantic cursing of the man who had talked to him, back there in the shed. The sound faded, and he saw that they were cutting across an old, weed-grown lot, then the odor told him that they had reached the rear door of a livery barn.

Ford shoved, but the door refused to move. Chinook put his own weight against it, and felt it open with unexpected ease, then they were inside, out of the rain, the eaves behind them dripping with steady persistency. The sighing breath and occasional restless stamp-

ing of horses sounded from dim recesses, and far down the long barn a lantern hung, shedding a faint yellow glow. Ford paused, breathing heavily. Chinook eyed him in sudden concern.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Did they get you?"

Ford shook his head.

"Not in there," he denied. "But I had a fight last night—got gunclubbed. I'll be all right. We've got to be gettin' out of here—"

That accounted for his lethargy, back there in the saloon. He stopped, as through the big front door at the other end of the stable, a couple of shadowy figures entered, pausing to talk to the stableman, who stepped suddenly out of a small office at the side. There was a moment of argument, then a hand lifted ghostily, Chinook saw the flash of steel in the light, and the stableman crumpled in a heap, senseless.

Coolly, one of the pair proceeded to lift down the lantern, then they moved down the aisle of the stable, flashing the light back into stalls, and presently halted.

"Here's his horse," growled the man who had first talked to Chinook. "He didn't come here."

"I just thought he might have, Lefty," Hobe explained. "What do we do now?"

"Reckon we'd better get out to Ford's Turkey Track ranch, pronto," Lefty decided. "It's a cinch that Ford'll be headin' for there."

"But what if he does? Ain't the boss there—not to mention Kurtch an' the Rattlesnake?"

"You're a slow-witted fool, Hobe. That's just why we need to get there too. Things ain't going right—and it's up to us to let Rialto know, pronto."

"Guess you're right. But what about this other hombre? Who's he, and what's he doing in it?"

Lefty swore savagely.

"Strikes me he must be this damn Chinook. He was at the shed—and it was darker'n the inside of a horse. But we'll settle with him, whoever he is, 'fore we finish. Come on."

While they talked, they had been leading horses out of stalls and throwing saddles on them. Now they led them out into the night and were gone. Ford swung on Chinook.

"Who you are, and what you're mixin' in this for, I don't know," he said. "But I sure appreciate what you've done to help me out. Could you saddle a couple of horses? I feel kind of unsteady."

Chinook complied, throwing a saddle on Ford's own horse. He

explained that his own was at the outskirts of town. A glance at the fallen stableman showed him that the fellow was not badly hurt, and would recover of his own accord before long.

"I don't know whether you'll want to go with me, or not," Ford said. "I've got to head for the Turkey Track, and find out what's going on there. If you'll stick by me, I'll see that you don't lose by it. Though I warn you that it'll be dangerous."

"I'm mixed in this, anyhow," Chinook said grimly. "Let's be ridin'."

Ford agreed. They found Chinook's horse where he had left it, rode out of town. What it was all about, Chinook was still about as much in the dark as ever, but there could no longer be any doubt that big stakes were involved here, and that George Ford and his sister were involved in it, somewhere. He questioned Ford about Ghost Ranch, but without much result.

"I wish I knew," Ford admitted wearily. "Rialto wanted to buy it, all of a sudden—and havin' just found out what sort of a skunk he was—and he'd sure played me for a fool, to the queen's taste—I knew there was something crooked about it. So naturally I wouldn't sell.

"But as to what he could want of Ghost Ranch—that's more'n I can figure. It's a long way from here, way off high in the mountains. There's an old ghost town right in the middle of it—Hangtown. Mebbe you've heard of it. It was plenty tough in its day."

"Yeah, I've heard of it," Chinook admitted.

"That was a long spell of years back—before I was born, I guess. A rich strike that petered out. But aside from memories, neither the town nor the ranch is any good. Too high and cold, except for a little summer pasture, and too far from anywhere to drive cattle there for a few weeks in summer. Drive off more fat, going back and forth, than the grass would put on."

Chinook found himself liking Ford, as they talked. He was frank to admit that he had made a fool of himself, and that his sister had been ready to sacrifice herself to save him. Learning of that had brought him up with a jerk. But as to what was back of it all, he had no more idea than Chinook.

As they rode, Chinook gave him a history of what had happened, since he had arrived in this section of country, and of what had transpired back in Kansas. And of that letter, which Rialto had desired so desperately, then had blasted to virtual ruin with his own bullets!

Ford frowned over the few lines of message which Chinook repeated to him, then shook his head.

"Don't make any sense to me," he said. "I—who's that?"

A dark figure loomed in the trail ahead of them, but he answered readily enough.

"That you, George? This is me—Harrigan."

Relief flowed in Ford's voice.

"Glad it is, Hap. Hap, this is Chinook—a friend of mine. Hap's one of my punchers, Chinook. What brings you here, Hap?"

"There's somethin' going on, out at the Turkey Track," Hap Harrigan explained uneasily. "Folks foolin' and prowlin' around in the dark, and I made out that they was lookin' for you, aimin' to waylay you on the way out here—so I slipped away and got here."

"That's fine. There's plenty going on—plenty of deviltry, though what it is, I haven't been able to find out—"

"Maybe you will, 'fore morning," Hap nodded. "One thing we'd better get straight, before we go any farther."

"What is it?" Ford asked, unsuspicious.

"This," said Harrigan, and the faint light rippled coldly on a revolver barrel as he thrust it abruptly in their faces. "And there's a couple more guns on you from that clump of brush at the side, so don't make any fool moves about yore own guns. It would be plumb disastrous!"

"And that's putting it mildly!" That was Rialto's voice, cold and sardonic, as he rode into sight, gun leveled. The rain had stopped, though it was cold and raw. Beside Rialto was another man, but it was too dark to recognize him.

"This is sure lucky, catchin' Chinook as well as you, Ford," Rialto went on. "Eh, Killer?"

"I been hopin' for some such luck," Killer Kurtch rumbled.

Ford had been speechless with surprise and the shock of his employee's treachery. Now he turned burning eyes on Harrigan.

"You'll pay for this—some day, Hap," he said thickly.

"There won't be any some day, Kid," Rialto said harshly. "He got the job on the Turkey Track in the first place, to spy for me. But you and Chinook have got in my way, and that means you have to get out of it. You said you had a scheme you'd like to try, Killer?"

Kurtch chuckled unpleasantly.

"I sure have," he agreed. "One that's so plumb perfect it couldn't be improved on. After what this hombre's done, I don't want him to die too fast or too easy. You turn him over to me, along with Ford, and with Hap to help me and the Rattlesnake—and then you can go along to the Turkey Track without worryin' any more about 'em."

"That'll be fine," Rialto agreed. "They're yours. Just see to it that they don't trouble me again—ever."

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*Chapter X*

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HARRIGAN, while the others talked, had taken Chinook's and Ford's guns. With three guns on them, there was nothing to do but submit. But it was far from a pleasant prospect. Chinook had already seen enough of Kurtch to know that the Killer had a twisted mentality. Odd and unusual methods of torture were a fetish with him, and the Rattlesnake was a willing follower where he led.

"You got Big Nose," Kurtch growled. "But what we'll do to you will make that seem right tame by comparison. When I have a score to settle, I settle it."

Leaving the trail, they struck off toward the south, with one man behind them, the others riding on either side. Escape, for the time at least, was out of the question. And to be prisoners now, through an act of wanton treachery, made it seem that much worse. Chinook's mind went back to Vivian, to the wild, free spirit of her. He had promised her to help her brother—but the way things looked now, he wasn't making much of a job of it. And Rialto was still free.

Even though the rain had stopped, the night was still cold and raw, and they were soaked to the skin. Ford shivered, his teeth chattering as he rode. They had gone for about an hour on this side trail, and Rattlesnake was complaining querulously that it would be easier, safer and quicker to simply fill them full of lead and dump them into some convenient canyon.

"That'd be the easy way, but not the good one," Kurtch rasped. "Here we are," he added, as a low, sullen sound came faintly to their ears. "The river's right ahead, the water's high, and after the rain they've been havin' up in the mountains, she's risin' a foot an hour. Be six-eight foot higher by noon tomorrow than what it is now, down there in the gorge."

"What you gettin' at?" Rattlesnake demanded.

"Come on and I'll show you," Kurtch said.

They all dismounted, leaving the horses to stand ground-hitched. Dawn was in the air now, a gray and sullen morning, but the light was penetrating enough to reveal vague outlines which swiftly began to take form and shape. This was a country of gorges and deep can-

yons, sparsely wooded with pine and spruce, with high rocky cliffs and a scattering of great boulders, as though a giant had used them in a game of marbles and left them scattered haphazardly.

Now the roar grew louder, and just ahead were high, sheer rock walls of a box canyon. Down in here was the river, Chinook knew, though he could not see it. But the very sound was ominous.

Circling back, heading upstream, they finally were above the high walls of the canyon, and down to the river itself, where the water came almost to their feet. The steadily rising current, which showed that a very heavy rain had fallen somewhere up above, was roily and ugly, lapping about the foot of a great pine tree which ordinarily would be well out of water. Not ten feet below it, the high walls of the canyon began, the river between them with that ominous growl. There was also a louder, reverberating thunder which Chinook could not account for, until Hap asked a question.

"We going to pitch 'em in and let 'em go over the waterfall?"

Kurtch chuckled, unpleasantly.

"Nothin' that crude," he said. "Here, give me a hand." He pushed back into a dense tangle of brush, then presently dragged to light a flat-bottomed row-boat, which was further testimony that he knew the river here well. "You remember that little sort of a cave, back in the side of the cliff, Rattler?" he asked.

Rattlesnake scratched his head, then nodded.

"Yeah, seems like I do," he agreed. "What about it?"

"Harrigan and me, we'll take 'em down to that, in the boat," Kurtch explained. "And leave 'em in the cave."

"But yuh can't row a boat in that current," Rattlesnake protested. "It'll sweep you right on down, over the falls."

"Sure would," Kurtch agreed. "But with a rope snubbed around this tree, yuh can let us drift down that far, then pull us back up here. That'll be yore job."

"And miss all the fun?" Rattlesnake snarled. "Whyn't you handle the rope?"

"Don't make no matter o' diff'rence to me," Kurtch said indifferently. "See to it that you get 'em back there in good shape."

"Yuh mean, dead?" the Rattlesnake demanded.

"Nothin' of the kind." Kurtch turned to Chinook gloatingly. "You was pretty smart, back at that cliff trail," he said. "We'll see if you can be so smart twice. Right here, it'll take a lot more'n that. This'll be the river of no return for you interferin' hombres. You'll die, but not too fast or easy. The water'll be over the top of the cave," he

added to Rattlesnake. "Before noon. If they stay in there, they drown. If they want to get out and take a swim—down over the waterfall—why, that's up to them."

Now, for the first time, a grin overspread the heavy face of the Rattlesnake, as he understood the plan. With the rope tied to the boat and snubbed around the tree, and plenty of slack to play out, Chinook and Ford were forced to climb into the boat.

"This way, when they're found, if they ever are, there'll be no proof of anything but an accident in the flood," Kurtch added. "Which is the way Rialto wants it. He aims to set up and be respectable, one of these days. We won't be responsible. We're leavin' 'em alive and well—when we leave 'em."

That, Chinook realized, was another fetish of the Killer. He had impressed it upon Chinook, back at the cliff trail, that it would be a voluntary act on Chinook's part, and that the hanging of the sheriff and his deputies would be Chinook's fault, not his. The man was a cold-blooded, crazed killer, but these quirks of his mind made him even more sinister.

Hap Harrigan, looking uncomfortable, was in the boat, and the Rattlesnake took his place as well. Then, as he felt the tug of that savagely relentless current, a shade of apprehension crossed his face.

"Watch that rope careful now, Kurtch," he warned.

"Shore, I'll watch it," the Killer promised. They were already away from the shore, with the water making a dancing cork of the boat. "Who was it that run away and left Big Nose an' me in the lurch?" he added, and there was something in the words as well as the tone which made the Rattlesnake look back anxiously.

But it was too late to turn back, in any case. The two outlaws were in the same boat with them, Chinook reflected grimly, and, like them, at the mercy of a mad killer who knew no mercy. The boat was moving now between the sheer rocky walls of the gorge, where the flooded river raced turbulently. No swimmer, however good, would stand any chance in that water. Rattlesnake chuckled sardonically, his momentary fears forgotten.

"Here's the end of the free ride," he said. "This is where you hombres get out."

They were some seventy or eighty feet downstream now from the big pine, and at Rattlesnake's yell, the rope stopped playing out. Down in here, between these high walls, the dark still held, with only a grayness across the sullen east. Chinook could tell that the cliff rose

sheer and smooth above them for at least forty feet here, and in the side of it, just above the level of the steadily rising water, was the cave—which was merely a hole gouged by the water, back in the rocky cliffside, a hole about four feet high, and the same in width and depth.

"Out yuh go," Rattlesnake growled. "And when you get tired of stayin' here, yuh can go for a swim!"

Ford's shivering had abated, though he still looked cold. Chinook hesitated. With two guns covering them, there was small choice in the matter. If they hesitated, they died. With Kurtch's restraining presence lifted, the Rattlesnake wouldn't fool long.

But once back in the cave, death would be only a matter of time, at best. If the river continued to rise, as Kurtch was confident that it would, they must drown. If it failed to do so, then starvation was the only other alternative, with that waterfall below. Yet any sort of reprieve was better than being blasted by guns now. Ford scrambled out and into the cave, and after a moment, Chinook followed him.

His mind was working at top speed. Now was the time to do something, for it was now or never. Eyes accustomed to the gloom, he saw something which roused a measure of hope. There were no loose stones back in here, for the flooded river, reaching up here each season at high tide, washed the place clean.

But it had gouged the hole here in the first place because there had been a weakness, a fault in this section of the cliff, and he saw a chunk which looked as if it might be broken loose quite easily. Even as he leaped from the boat, Chinook grabbed at it and wrenched hard.

A moment of tugging, and it came loose in his hands—a chunk of rock as big as his head. The boat, with the two men rowing hard against the current, and Killer Kurtch pulling up above, was already a dozen feet away, starting the return trip. Without an instant's hesitation, Chinook whirled, slammed his chunk of rock straight at the boat.

It struck hard and fairly, knocking a hole in the side of the boat, through which the hungry river instantly poured. Then things happened fast. Almost at once, with the water getting a grip, the boat swung sidewise and capsized. The Rattlesnake was yelling frantically to Kurtch up above, though his voice, above the roar of the river, would be little more than a whisper at canyon head. Harrigan too, let out one anguished yelp of terror before he hit the water. Then, helpless in the grip of the floodtide, the traitor vanished in the gloom.

The Rattlesnake was floundering in the water, but unlike Harrigan,

he retained his presence of mind and was clinging to the wrecked boat, still yelling desperately to Kurtch to pull him back up to safety.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Unable to see down here, partly because of the gloom and partly on account of a slight bend of the canyon wall, Kurtch was probably puzzled for a few moments as to what was happening. Then, as he understood, that murderous quirk in his character came uppermost again. Probably he had intended to pull the two back to safety, so long as nothing happened. But now, while the Rattlesnake still bawled for help, Chinook saw the almost motionless hulk of the wrecked boat bob wildly, then start to floating downstream. Kurtch had deliberately let go of the rope.

Here, at last, was a chance, if they could make use of it—a chance induced by Chinook's quick action with the rock.

"Grab on to my legs, Ford," he yelled, and as Ford obeyed, Chinook leaned far out over the water, grabbed, and his fingers closed on Rattlesnake's leg. Pulling hard against the desperate tug of the river, he managed to drag him in, half drowned already. Shoving him back, Chinook reached out again, and this time his fingers caught what he had reached for in the first place—the tangle of rope, floating past.

With Ford's help, he pulled in the rope, no easy task since one end of it was still fastened to what remained of the fast-disintegrating boat. But finally they had it all in—a good hundred feet of rope. All of the boat which came with it, however, was one board, about three feet long and a few inches wide. The rest had been smashed to bits.

Already, the steadily rising river was lapping in about their feet, as daylight came thinly down into the canyon. The gray expanse of the flooded river was cheerless and unpromising. Coughing and gasping, Rattlesnake sat weakly up and looked about, then cursed heavily.

"The dirty rat!" he gasped. "Lettin' go the rope soon as he saw a chance! Pullin' a double-cross on me! The dirty skunk!"

"Seems to me it was you that insisted on comin' along to get us in this," Ford said. "You got nothin' but what's comin' to you."

"Yeah, you called this the River of No Return," Chinook nodded. "And now you're in it along with us. Got any suggestions for getting out?"

"We'll all die like rats in a trap," Rattlesnake squalled. "The river'll cover this in a couple of hours. If we get out, it'll sweep us over the falls. We ain't got a chance."

"How high is the waterfall?" Chinook asked.

"Close to a hundred feet. You can't go over it an' live."

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Chapter XI

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DISMAY surged through Chinook at the answer, almost smothering the thread of hope on which he had been building. If it was that bad, his scheme was probably unworkable.

But at least they were still alive, with the rope as a possible aid, and instead of three enemies on the shore to guard against any possibility of escape, there was now only Kurtch. It was even doubtful if he would hang around here long, convinced in his own mind that everything was, or very soon would be, over with. He had conceived that the Rattlesnake had deserted Big Nose and himself when they were in trouble, forgetting how ignominiously he had run when believing that he had been struck by the rattler. So he had callously condemned the Rattlesnake to death by releasing the rope.

In the slow-growing light of day, Chinook peered downstream. They had the rope, but it would be impossible, even with it, to climb up the sheer, water-smoothed cliff above them. Even a mountain goat would have found no trail there.

He could see, now, to the brink of the waterfall—perhaps seventy or eighty feet farther downstream, where the box canyon ended abruptly. The river hurtled toward it in a veritable millrace, and there was no shore on either side—just the sheer rising walls of the canyon.

Near the middle of the narrow river gorge, and a few feet from the brink of the falls, was the only hopeful thing he had seen yet—a hoary-headed boulder which reared itself defiantly three or four feet above the water. That was all.

"Not very encouragin', is it?" Ford asked, quietly.

"Could be worse," Chinook said, with a cheerfulness he did not feel. "We've got a chance."

"I don't see where," Rattlesnake protested.

"It's a slim one, but it's a chance," Chinook repeated. "You'd just as soon live to get back at your double-crossin' partner, wouldn't you?"

"Would I, though?" The Rattlesnake's heavy face brightened. "He sure pulled a dirty deal on me an' Harrigan. I'd be willin' to hang, if I could live long enough to put a noose around his neck first."

"Mebby you can. But before we make a start, I'm curious about a few things. What does Rialto want of Ford's Ghost Ranch?"

The Rattlesnake hesitated a moment, then he spoke with a rush.

"I sure ain't got nothin' to lose by tellin'. Not that I know much of it. But there's a big fortune, hid somewhere in the mountains. Rialto knows that much about it, and he aims to get his hands on it. He's been workin' toward that end for quite a spell now. Figgered that there was a letter comin' in the mail that'd tell him what he wanted to know. He went to a lot of trouble to get hold of that letter, but I guess it didn't tell much, after he got it."

"I guess it didn't," Chinook agreed. "I had a look at that letter. About all it did was to say something about a saddle."

"That's it," the Rattlesnake said excitedly. "Seems like there's an old saddle, hid somewhere, that has a map, or somethin', hid in it somewhere—tellin' how to find that money, I guess. And Rialto figgers that the saddle's hid somewhere on Ghost Ranch—mebby in Hangtown. How he got that information, I don't know, but it could be."

He spat disgustedly.

"If it'd been me, I'd of headed for the ranch without any foolin'. But he's been wantin' to make Ford sell it to him, or somethin'. Seems like a lot of tom-foolery to me."

So that was it. A few of the obscure points were beginning to emerge a little. And while such indirection might seem foolishness to Rattlesnake, Chinook had a pretty good idea that Rialto knew what he was about, and had a good reason for whatever he did. Ford had listened with interest, but he confessed that it was all news to him.

"That letter was addressed to your sister," Chinook reminded him. "You haven't any idea who might have written it?"

"Not a notion. But hadn't we better try getting out of here—if you've any scheme at all that might work?"

That was logical, for the water was around their feet now. Chinook wedged the piece of board into a corner, solidly, with the end of the rope tied to it. Then he handed the rest of the rope to Ford, tying the other end about his own waist.

"I'm going to try to reach that boulder that sticks up there, above the dam," he explained. "Let the slack out easy but steady. If I make it and get the rope fast, you two come along and join me."

"But what good will that do?" Rattlesnake protested. "We can't ever get down over the falls alive."

"Nothin' like tryin'," Chinook said drily. "Stayin' here to drown

isn't any improvement over doing it out there, that I can see. Here goes."

He let himself out into the water, and the grip of the current tugged like a mighty hand. The rope about his waist, even as he clung to it to ease the strain and tried to swim a little, threatened to cut him in two or to stave in his ribs, so viciously did the river pull.

But Ford was letting the rope out steadily, and it was carrying him almost straight toward that boulder jutting there in mid-stream. He reached it, managed to swing and hit it feet first, with knees bent to take the shock. Even so, he was flung against it so hard that it almost knocked the breath from him, then he was forced to cling desperately to keep from being torn loose and swept on. It was plain that the two men, holding to the rope, could not hold it against the terrible pull of the current on his body. All that they could do was to slow it somewhat.

Now, clinging to the rope, which had grown taut, Chinook held fast, then managed to pull himself partly out of the boiling current and cling there, precariously enough. Just below, he could see the boiling waterfall, with spray rising high. He took one look, then was careful not to look again. Even the thing which he had planned before seemed utterly reckless and crazy now—but it was that or nothing.

He tied the rope fast to the rock, so that it would be taut, motioned with upflung arm. He saw Ford slide out, come sweeping along at a fast clip, one arm crooked over the rope, but tossed like a chip on the current. Chinook grabbed him and clung fast as Ford reached him, and together the two of them managed to hang fast, though there was little enough room on the slippery stone in which to perch. And the angry waters shoved and tore continually at their legs, as though determined to wrench them loose.

Chinook signaled again, and after a moment's hesitation, Rattlesnake came along, spurred now by the hope of vengeance as much as anything else. Between them, Chinook and Ford caught him and stopped him, though the other end of the rope suddenly whipped loose from its anchorage, partly from the strain, partly because the water had risen high enough in the cave to float the board loose, as Chinook had counted on when fastening it.

So far, things were working as well as he had dared hope for. He had the rope, with one end of it loose, the other fastened now to the boulder. But to let himself over the side, down into that seething torrent of tumbling water, and hope to ever come out alive—

But whatever was done had to be soon. The water was cold, and

they'd soon be too numb to do much to help themselves. Chinook forced a grin.

"Well, here goes," he said again, and, with the rope twisted about his arms, started to slide.

A moment more and he was in the blinding surge of the waterfall—buffeted, nearly drowned, despite the fact that he was keeping his mouth tight shut. He was sliding down the rope at a dizzy speed, swept along faster than he liked, but he still managed to cling to it, so that the speed was lessened from a straight pitching fall, and the water helped to cool the burning friction of the rope as well.

All at once he knew that he had reached the bottom, and was at the end of the rope as well, as he clutched at nothingness, then was tossing in a great, deep pool of water, with blinding spray everywhere.

But luck had been with him. He had reached the bottom, had been tossed out away from the smashing force of the waterfall itself, and had not hit any boulders as he descended. Now, if he could get to the shore—

He had a glimpse of it, not more than twenty feet away, a gradually shelving bank, continually wet by the spray. Something dark was in the water beside him, and he saw that it was the now senseless form of Ford, grabbed at him, and struggled to the bank and out.

Ford was half-drowned, close to exhaustion, and Chinook guessed that he had probably hit his head on something in the last part of the fall, the rap knocking him completely unconscious. But he was still alive.

With legs buckling under him, Chinook dragged his companion a little way back, beyond the spray, to where the first of the rays of the sun were beginning to reach. For ten minutes he was too spent to do more than lie there. When he raised his head and looked around, there was no sign of the Rattlesnake, either in the river below the falls or up there at that boulder, rearing above it.

But Ford, with unexpected vitality, was showing signs of returning consciousness. Half an hour later, the two of them started walking, heading back toward town. An hour of stumbling along served to warm them, as their clothes gradually dried. But by that time they were too spent to go any farther. Stretching on a warm, sunny slope, they slept.

It was late afternoon when Chinook awoke, stiff and sore, ravenously hungry, but feeling better than he had dared to hope for in the early dawn. Ford sat up, rubbing his eyes, and managed a grin.

"Guess my luck improved when I met up with you, Chinook," he

said. "Or you came along to help me out. And you've sure pulled me out of a couple of bad holes."

"I couldn't have gotten out of that last one without your help," Chinook reminded him. "But let's get to where we can get somethin' to eat. Seems like nothing else bulks half as important, right now."

"Suits me," Ford agreed. "We'd ought to reach town in a couple of hours."

They did so, just before dusk. News of what had happened at Moccasin had reached Birdseye by then, and Rialto and his gang were definitely in the outlaw class. Which would hamper them very little, Chinook figured. But Ford was known here, as owner of the Turkey Track, and they were welcomed, fed, and sheltered. Early the next morning they were in the saddle again, heading back for Moccasin.

To his own surprise, Chinook found that he was eager, even impatient—and there could be but one reason for that. He wanted to see Vivian Ford again. She had called him a love-sick calf, and had made sundry other uncomplimentary remarks. But she had acted with swift decision, and had saved his life. And he suddenly realized that the memory of Amy was a shadowy, dream-like thing—as it had been for most of the past half-decade, only a dream. That had been supplanted by a person who was very much flesh and blood.

Something of the same eagerness was gripping George Ford now. He had ridden away from here under a shadow, but now he had burned his bridges, had made a definite break with the old life into which Rialto had tried to lead him, and he was impatient to see his sister again and to assure her that she need not worry about him any more on that score.

"I guess I've been pretty much of a worry to her," he confessed, a little shamefacedly. "But that's over with! I want to see her face."

He put his horse to a gallop, and Chinook followed. They swept up to the house, there on the outskirts of town, bright now under the sun. Chinook's horse snorted at something, gave a sidewise jump, slipped and went sprawling. Taken by surprise, Chinook went over its head. He hit hard, and a wave of blackness rolled over him.

An aching head, which felt as though someone was pounding on his skull with a hammer, was Chinook's first waking sensation. Then he saw Ford's distressed face above him.

"Better now, Chinook?" Ford asked. "Comin' out of it? You—you sure better. Vivian's gone—vanished! I think that devil of a Rialto has kidnapped her!"

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Chapter XII

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CHINOOK tried to sit up, but the flaming pain in his head blotted out the light, and he had to sink back again. Ford exclaimed in swift contrition.

"I'm a fool, to excite you that way, when you're in such shape," he exclaimed. "You took a bad rap. Here, lie back and take it easy. The first thing for you to do is to rest."

Like it or not, Chinook realized vaguely that that was the truth. Dizziness shook him, almost making him sick, the throbbing pain in his head blotted out every coherent thought. Something insisted that he must wake up, be up and doing something, but against this was something more powerful, and he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

It was a nightmare for a while, but finally he rested more easily, and when he woke again, morning sunshine was coming in at the window, and there was something vaguely familiar about the room. Chinook looked about, and recognized it. This was the town house of the Fords.

Instantly recollection flowed back. What had George said about Vivian being kidnapped? He sat up, finding that he felt pretty much as usual again. It was the next morning, and a long sleep had done him a lot of good. In fact, he must have slept over half of the preceding day and night as well. Save for a little soreness near the back of his head, it felt well enough.

He found his clothes, dressed, and stepped into the next room. A door opened, off from the kitchen, and a tall, angular woman came in, nodding at sight of him.

"Good morning. You'll be feeling better this morning, I take it?"

"Considerably," Chinook agreed. "Er—where is George?"

"You'll be hungry too, I take it? I've got breakfast ready, here in the kitchen—pancakes, sausage, chokecherry jelly to smear on your cakes, and coffee. While you eat, I'll try and answer your questions. You're Chinook, I know. I'm Mrs. Pettybone. George asked me to come over and keep an eye on you, sort of."

"I'm glad to know you, Mrs. Pettybone," Chinook agreed. "And breakfast is just what I need, I must have slept a long time."

"You did pretty well, after the doc came and gave you a shot of somethin' in the arm. Up to then you tossed and moaned and carried on awful. He said all you needed was a good sleep, and so you got it."

"And George—where is he?"

"Started right out, yesterday, to try and find his sister. Don't know that I can blame him—though it's worse'n a wild goose chase, to my mind, when you haven't a blessed idea where to look for her."

Gradually, as he ate, Chinook learned what little was known. Two nights ago, Vivian had vanished. Without a word to anyone or leaving a trace behind. George Ford had immediately jumped to the conclusion that Rialto had kidnapped her. And, everything considered, that was a logical enough guess, Chinook had to concede, and went cold at the thought of it.

He likewise had to agree with Mrs. Pettybone that Ford had probably embarked on a wild goose chase, in trying to find her—rushing off in such a hurry, merely to be doing something. Though, feeling as he did, Chinook could understand why he had done so.

"George, he asked me to look after you, so as to make sure you'd be all right," Mrs. Pettybone explained. "But he was so flustered that I'm afraid no good'll come of it."

"You haven't any idea where he headed for, have you?"

"Talked kind of wild of Ghost Ranch, but that's all I know."

Chinook finished his breakfast thoughtfully. His own impulse was to take up the trail too—but without some definite clue to go by, chasing around that way could do more harm than good. He stood up, pushed back his chair.

"That was a wonderful breakfast, Mrs. Pettybone," he said. "And I'm grateful. I think I'll go down and talk to the sheriff."

"Good idea," she nodded. "Couldn't think of a better."

Chinook found Sheriff Barkley in his office. Barkley rose ponderously to greet him, but his handshake was warm. Tom Mobray, he reported, was getting along as well as could be expected.

"I'm worried about Vivian Ford and her brother," the sheriff confessed. "Same as you are, I take it. George, he'll be runnin' into more trouble again. But just runnin' around, without knowin' what you're doing—that don't pay."

He turned suddenly, delved among the papers on his desk, and held out a letter.

"Here's somethin' that came for you, just this mornin'," he said. "Brought up from the south—from the state penitentiary. The toms, as they call them."

He handed an envelope to Chinook. It was addressed to Chinook Carter, in care of Sheriff Barkley, and was on prison stationery. Chinook looked his amazement.

"Mebby I can explain as we go along," the sheriff nodded. "I made a sort of hasty trip down to the pen, with Big Nose. Knew they wanted him there. Got to talkin' with the warden. He's an old friend of mine. And Vivian, she'd been in here, talkin' to me about that letter that you brought here—the one that was all shot up. I mentioned various things, and the warden happened to be able to put two and two together. He knew who'd written her that letter—one of his boarders. Old convict named Mugs Farrington. Queer sort of a character. Mighty queer. Robbed the Overland stage, years ago—one of the biggest holdups the country ever knew."

He nodded toward the letter.

"Your letter is from Mugs, too. After he'd talked to me a spell. I brought it back with me—just got back this mornin' myse'f, is how come it just arrived. You read it, then I'll try and answer the rest of yore questions. Well as I can."

Here, as chance would have it, aided by Barkley, it looked as if some sort of a clue might be at hand at last. Chinook tore the letter open, spread out the sheet of paper, which had been written in a scrawling, rather unsteady hand.

"Dear Chinook," it ran. "The warden, and the sheriff, have been tellin' me all about you. What a great fighter you are, and an honest man. And what you have done for Vivian Ford and her brother.

"I gues you will be surprised to hear from me. And here is something to keep under yore hat, that they don't even know themselves. George and Vivian Ford are my nephew and niece. I wrote them that letter that you carried. From what the sheriff has said, I know it wasn't yore falt that it got mixed up, and maybe it's just as well. But you are the man I need to help me—and that will help them. This is mighty important to them. Will you come to see me right away?"

Chinook pushed it aside impatiently.

"Why should I go and see him?" he demanded. "If it's anything important, why didn't he tell you?"

"That's just it," the sheriff said patiently. "I talked to the warden, and he tells me that Mugs is kind of queer—he's been behind bars a long time. Likewise, he's near the end of his rope, and he knows it. The governor's pardonin' him out on that account. Now, Mugs wants

to do something before he dies, something to help his own kinfolks, I gather. But he's suspicious of most lawmen, of any sort. When he heard of you, though, he said you sounded like an honest man, and he'd trust you. I think this is something big, Chinook, but I don't know what. And it might lead to them—since it all seems to be tied up with Rialto."

Chinook took a turn about the room, stared out the window, and swung back.

"Maybe you're right," he agreed. "I'll go see him, if you think it's a good idea."

"You'll need some money," Barkley said promptly. "And you've got some comin'. Here. And good luck."

Chinook arrived at the penitentiary a day later. The red-brick walls were old, but age could not mellow their innate grimness. There was an air of desolation here in this place of lost hopes. Though the warden, Tom Lansing, had a reputation as a square dealer. Presently Chinook was closeted with him—a big, hearty bluff man, with a way of coming straight to the point.

"It's kind of a queer set-up," Lansing explained. "Mugs Farrington is living on borrowed time. That's why he's being pardoned out now. But he's kind of—well, touched in the head. How much of what he'll tell you is true, and how much is imagination, I wouldn't be able to say. I think there's likely some truth mixed up in the whole thing, but I'm tellin' you this before you see him, so that you'll be sort of prepared."

The warden paused, went on slowly.

"He talks about men like Mike Hogan, and Hardluck Trant—old hard-case characters who have been dead for years. They used to be in the same gang with Mugs, but he keeps talkin' about them, as if they were still alive. Maybe it's just plain raving, for he isn't the man he used to be, either mentally or physically. I really don't know what it's all about, for he won't tell me. Says you're the only man he will tell. He seems to've gotten the idea that, since you helped his nephew and niece out, that he can trust you. Anyway, I've a hunch that it may be worth-while, at that."

His curiosity whetted, Chinook was ushered, presently, into the cell where Mugs Farrington awaited him. It was, he saw, a cell with a southern exposure, one of the cleanest and most comfortable in the penitentiary, with sunshine streaming through the barred window, and a canary in a cage, even a red geranium in a window. This was per-

mitted because Mugs was soon to go free, and because he was a sick man.

Just how sick, was easy to see. Plainly he had been a big man, in the old days—big and bony and powerful, with plenty of flesh to cover his frame, and a grip like the jaws of a steel trap, his hair black.

But now, though fully dressed, the man on the bed was thin and wasted, plainly a mere shadow of his former self, and his hair was white as his cheeks. The sharpness of his eyes had been replaced by a half-dreamy, or perhaps half-hazy look. At Chinook's entrance, he stared vaguely for a moment, and blinked. Then he raised up eagerly, a touch of color in his sunken cheeks.

"Chinook!" he exclaimed. "I've heard tell of you from others. Shadow Sullivan, for one. You went out, as a dep'ty sheriff, and followed him for two months, and brought him in, when no other man could do it. You're the one, ain't you?"

"Why—why yes, I guess," Chinook agreed, carried abruptly back for years to this former episode, a long way from here.

"I knew it," Mugs chuckled. "Shadow was a pal of mine. Said you was the one honest man he ever met, and that's enough for me. And now you turn up here. Reckon you're one man I can trust with a fortune."

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## Chapter XIII

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THEY were alone in the cell now. Mugs went on, speaking normally enough now.

"Likely you think I sound kind of crazy, but I ain't," he said. "When I heard how you'd helped out George an' Vivian Ford, and who you was, I knew it was a real stroke of luck. Like I said before, they don't know that I'm their uncle. I—I changed my name, back 'fore they was born. I was the black sheep of the fam'ly. I been kind of keepin' track of them, good as I could, which wasn't much. They're fine an' straight. And now, when I ain't got much more time left, it's time I sort of done somethin' for 'em, and to sort of right some wrongs I did, a long spell ago."

"Yes?" Chinook nodded.

"I aimed to use the money I had hid, for myself—up till recent," Mugs confessed. "But I won't ever be able to get any good out of it now, and everybody else that had any claim, like mine, to it, is dead. So, since there'll be a nice reward for its recovery, I want to fix things right, and for them to get the reward. Get it?"

He chuckled suddenly, at Chinook's expression.

"Guess yuh don't," he said. "And it ain't to be wondered at, the way I'm tellin' it backwards. But mebby yuh've heard of what was called the High Pockets robbery, back mebby twenty-five years ago?"

"Who hasn't heard of it?" Chinook asked. "It was one of the biggest robberies in the history of the West."

"Yeah," Mugs agreed. "Well, I hid the loot from that job—and what I want is for you to go with me, help me dig it up again, and return it to whoever has the legal right to it now. I reckon the old concern of the High Pockets mine has likely gone plumb out of business, but they'll have heirs, I guess. And the reward 'll still stand. Eighty thousand in loot—ten thousand reward. Ten thousand 'll put George an' Vivian on their feet. Though you'll have a cut comin', for helpin' me find it."

Chinook caught his breath. Was this the truth? The High Pockets robbery came in the category of dead men, all right. It had happened before his day, though he had heard plenty about it. Gold bullion in bars, being shipped out by wagon from the fabulous High Pockets mine, somewhere in these same mountains, to the north.

Six men guarding the wagon had been murdered, the gold stolen. Some of the gang known to have been involved had been rounded up by the law. Others, like Mike Hogan and Hardluck Trant, had escaped. But no trace of the stolen money had ever been found. The High Pockets mine had been a rich one in those days, but the loss had unquestionably been a serious one.

"Nobody ever guessed that I was one of that gang, or that I had the hidin' of that loot," Mugs went on. "But I did, and it's stayed hid all these years."

Chinook stared, incredulously, remembering what the warden had told him only a little while before.

"But you're in here for another robbery of ten years ago," he said. "Why would you leave that much money hidden for fifteen years, then risk your neck in a railroad robbery, like you did, for only a quarter of that amount?"

Mugs chuckled, mirthlessly.

"Sounds plumb loco, don't it?" he asked. "And most folks think I am loco—maybe I am, some, at that. But I know about this gold, and I'll tell yuh. I no sooner got that loot from the High Pockets cached away good, than I got picked up by the law for another job I'd been mixed up in, a year or so before, and they went and clapped me in the pen, down in New Mexico. Or mebbe it was Arizony. Anyway, I'd gone there for my health, and to let the hue an' cry of that big gold grab sort of settle before I tried to use any of the gold.

"But that country didn't turn out to be so healthy as I'd figgered it would. I spent near fifteen years in that pen, but under a diff'rent name—le's see, I was Jake Trant there—so nobody up this way ever guessed that I'd been jailed down there."

He paused while a spasm of coughing shook him, went on.

"When I got out of the pen down there, I wanted to get my hooks on that High Pockets gold, mighty bad. But I was broke, and it was a long way to go without an outfit. And my mem'ry was botherin' me some, on account of gettin' hit across the head with a club once. Sometimes I couldn't remember, then ag'in I could. So I set down and fixed things up, so if I forgot I could still find it. I fixed things in the saddle."

The saddle! That was what had been mentioned in that letter.

"I made a code, and it's a clever one, if I do say it mys'f," Mugs went on. "Fixed it up in a saddle, and that saddle's in one of those old buildin's at Hangtown! Not that I put it there. After I'd fixed it up—and it looked like any other saddle, o' course—another hombre got hold of it by mistake, and headed that way. To get away from the law. Had his horse shot from under him, and left the saddle there. I found out that much—and he never did know what he'd been missin'!" Mugs chuckled mirthlessly.

"Well," he went on. "I aimed to go on and get the gold, but right then I run into some of a gang I'd known before, and they wanted me to help them with that railroad job. It sounded pretty safe an' easy, so I did—and you know what happened. I was caught and sent up here. Made me plenty mad, at the time."

"I'd think it would, all right."

"Sure did. But I guess it was all for the best. That loot wouldn't have done me any good. Dead man's gold—with a curse on it. I want to get it back where it belongs, take the curse off. And I want to fool them dead men that want it ag'in." He lowered his voice mysteriously, glancing around furtively.

"What do you mean?" Chinook demanded.

"Just what I say," Mugs said hoarsely. "I keep hearin' voices—the voices of dead men. Of the gang that was with me when we robbed the High Pockets. And them voices keep tellin' me that I got to get that gold, and divvy it up with them again—or if I don't, that I won't ever rest easy in the hereafter."

Voices! Was the man really loco, or not? Was this whole story just a figment of a disordered mind? Chinook wasn't sure. But there was a lot that was queer here—yet it sounded as if Rialto must believe this, and to be basing his whole campaign on it.

"What voices do you mean?" Chinook asked.

"Oh—their voices. Mike Hogan's, and Hardluck Trant, and Slant-head Ellison—"

"Trant? You said you were in the pen, down in Arizona or New Mexico, under that name?"

A gleam of cunning crept for a moment into Mugs' eyes.

"Yeah. Jake Trant. Hardluck's brother. I hated him, so I took his name to sort of spoil his reputation. He was dead, but nobody else knew it."

Chinook shook his head in resignation.

"Go on," he said. "You say you hear their voices?"

"Yeah. Voices. Sometimes at night, sometimes in the daytime. I hear 'em plain—here in this cell, like I heard 'em in the one I used to have. And in other places. Always tellin' me the same thing. And I ain't dreamin' that none."

"*Their* voices, eh? You recognize them?"

"Sure," Mugs nodded. "Red Mike, he always had a strong brogue. I knew him by that. Trant didn't sound quite right, and I told him so—the voice, I mean. But it answered that my voice had changed a lot in twenty-five years, and that dead men's voices always changed some anyway. I guess likely that's so."

"Could be." Chinook's mind was busily exploring the possibilities of this, in connection with what he already knew, but it was plain that such discrepancies had been explained to Mugs' somewhat befuddled mind in a satisfactory manner. "Anyway, you're sure it was them, talking to you?"

"Yeah. The voices told me some things that happened to the gang of us. Nobody else could have ever known about them, in any case. It's their voices all right."

His voice grew suddenly hard, impatient.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I ain't. They tell me I got to get that gold and divvy it up with Red Mike Hogan, and Hardluck an' Slant-head and so on—they called him Slanthead because he'd been hung once, and it left his neck kind of twisted. So I guess I got to do the job. But I want it to go back where it belongs, that gold, and for my niece an' nevvie to get a share of the reward money. You help me, Chinook, and I'll make it worth yore while. But I got to do it, to get some rest from them voices. They'll drive me crazy.

"I keep hearin' 'em, every day, every night, tellin' me I got to get that gold and give it back to my old pals. I swore, a long time back, that I'd never go near Hangtown, where it's cached, again—the town's like the gold, with a curse on it. But I ain't got no choice. I don't dare not go—now!"

"It's at Hangtown, you say—this gold?"

"Yeah, Hangtown, that's been a ghost town now for more'n a quarter of a century. And the saddle's there too, I guess, that has the directions for findin' it, if I forget. I tried to write to George about that saddle, but they tell me the letter got shot up. So I got to go. And I can't go alone. Will you help me?"

"Hangtown's a long, hard ride from here, Mugs. You couldn't travel even a quarter of that distance."

Mugs gave another brief cackle of laughter, which ended in a spasm of coughing. But he was grinning cunningly.

"Don't worry about that," he said. "I can make it. This is one of my bad days. I get 'em, every so often. But in a couple days, when they let me out of here, I'll be over this spell, and pretty good then for mebbie a week. Long enough to get there. Say you'll help me with it, Chinook!"

Chinook hesitated. He wanted to be searching for Vivian—he was surprised at the intensity of his desire to find her. But where should he look? And that one word seemed as logical an answer as any—Hangtown! There were powerful forces at work here, and Hangtown and that High Pockets gold was the crux of it all. Helping Mugs might be the surest, quickest way to a solution.

But those voices—he was convinced that Mugs wasn't crazy. This was a time to go circumspectly. Chinook stood up, as the old convict finished his plea. His face hardened, to match his voice.

"Nope," he said decisively. "It all sounds too crazy to me. Nothing doing—absolutely!"

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Chapter XIV

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THE OLD convict lifted his head to stare, startled and bewildered, a hurt look in his eyes, like that of a child. Then, seeing how Chinook's left eye was closing in a slow wink, his face cleared a little.

"I'd like to help you out," Chinook went on loudly. "But not in any such wild-goose chase as that. It sounds too loco, and I'm too busy to waste time that way. The warden should have known better than to get me down here for any such foolishness."

He leaned lower, and his voice was a whisper which barely reached Mugs' ears.

"I'll meet you, three days from now, by that red boulder in the rim-rocks, on beyond the Junction, on the way to Birdseye. Do you know the place?"

Mugs stared at him, nodded vigorously.

"I'll have an outfit," Chinook added in a whisper. Casually he clapped on his hat, turned to the door, and spoke in a normal tone again.

"Well, I hope that going free helps yore health, anyway. Better just forget all about this other stuff—there's nothin' to it. Get some place in the sun and take it easy. So long, Old Timer."

Mugs rose up, wrathfully. He could play a part too, when he got the idea.

"Get the blazes out of here," he rasped. "If I was half the man I once was, I'd break your dirty, double-crossin' neck for you. Er—nice day, ain't it?"

He was staring bemusedly at his geranium when Chinook stepped out into the corridor, more undecided about the whole affair than ever. When it came to the past, the old convict's mind did seem pretty clear, and Chinook was staking a lot on that, and on a sudden hunch that this would lead him finally to Rialto, to Vivian, and to a solution of the whole affair.

But it seemed pretty clear to him that, in matters of the present, Mugs lived in a world half real and half imaginary, and what that

might mean, or where this trail might lead, was anybody's guess. However, Rialto evidently believed in that High Pockets gold.

And if someone, probably working in cahoots with Rialto, was trying to induce Mugs to dig up the gold for them—that was a tangible thing. It had been on that hunch that Chinook had staged the by-play just before leaving the cell. For if there were voices, then there must be ears which listened, as well. In any case, it would be well to walk warily.

A trusty, tall and stoop-shouldered, with the squint of a desert rat in his eyes and a scar below the right one, escorted Chinook back to the warden's office, where Chinook reported, with a straight face, that he had no time for wild-goose chases, and only the flicker of his eye warned the warden to ask no questions. But he made sure that Mugs would be released according to plan.

That done, Chinook rode out of town. At an intervening stop he secured the necessary outfit for the long trail ahead, headed then for the rendezvous which he had appointed with Mugs. The rim-rocks were a desolate enough section of country, as he had discovered before, a remote and lonely place. But it was on the way to Ghost Ranch and Hangtown, and a logical spot in which to join Mugs without attracting attention. After that—well, Chinook had a hunch that there would be plenty happening before the end of this trail was reached.

It was morning of the day appointed when he came to the rim-rocks. A long outcropping of stone, laid layer upon layer, near the crest of a long slope. On beyond, down the other side, were more stones, the whole hill being overlaid with them. Still farther below flowed a creek, marked by a line of red willows. Closer at hand, near the crest, was the red boulder he had mentioned, a rose-colored stone which was a landmark for miles around.

Dawn was in the air, with deep pools of darkness lingering in the coulees and valleys, and the sharp bite of frost was in the air at this altitude, though the mountains proper still lifted their hoary heads well to the north and west. The white coating of the frost was like thin icing on a cake. This was wild country hereabouts, but Chinook knew that they would have to travel into higher, wilder, even more deserted country before they reached Hangtown.

There was no sign of Mugs. Chinook dismounted, allowed his cayuse and the pack horse to graze the scanty grass, and cooked his own breakfast over a small fire. As always, his mind went back to Vivian—she who was so forthright and outspoken, so quick to make a decision and then abide by it. Where was she, and how was she?

The question had assumed far more importance than he would ever have believed possible. He had to find her. If she was a hostage, it was likely that Rialto would treat her decently, at least until he had his hands on that lost gold of the High Pockets.

Chinook stirred, looked about impatiently. The sun was climbing the sky, and still there was no sign of the old convict. Chinook had rather expected to find him here when he arrived. Had something happened to delay him—or to more than delay him? Chinook stood up, began to look about sharply for possible sign. But there was none. He moved toward where the horses had wandered, down on the rocky slope which led toward the creek.

The pack horse snorted skittishly, turned and retreated for some distance. Then, as though just catching the whiff of something alien and sinister, his saddle pony did the same. Chinook looked around, surprised, to discover what had spooked them.

This was wild country enough, but the rocks were not big enough to shelter an animal of any size, nor were there any trees, or brush of much size. Only stones, everywhere—small, flat ones for the most part. And, a little distance away, a shepherd's monument.

His horse snorted again, and Chinook's hand dropped toward the butt of his holstered gun. There might be a sneaking puma, somewhere about. Only there didn't seem to be. Nothing to spook the horses, nothing save that shepherd's monument.

Chinook glanced at the monument again, puzzled. He had come upon plenty of such "monuments" in remote spots of the west, piles of stones built up by lonely herders to pass the time away. But what was such a monument doing here, in any case? It didn't seem likely that a shepherd had ever ventured within a hundred miles of this spot, or any sheep, either.

And only sheepmen built such monuments. Or did they? This one, on closer inspection, didn't look quite like ordinary monuments, which were mere piles of stones. This one was a bit higher than usual, wider, more carefully built. And there was no doubt of it now, it was this monument that his horses were shying away from so persistently.

There was no odor which Chinook could detect, though the cayuses detected something which alarmed them. But this pile of stones, on closer inspection, had a freshly-built look. And then he saw something stranger than the rest—a small piece of red cloth. It looked like the end of a bandana, and it was protruding from a crack between two of the piled stones in the nearer monument!

Thoroughly intrigued now, Chinook set to work, pulling the stones

loose and tossing them to one side. There was something funny here—decidedly so, and he wanted to know what it was. He removed another stone, then paused, still holding it, staring, his tanned face paling a little.

There was a man, standing inside the monument or pile of stones—a man hidden there and left prisoned in this grotesque fashion. Now Chinook understood why his horses had shied away from here. For the man was either unconscious, or dead. He jerked loose another stone, and his mouth tightened. This man was Mugs!

Which explained why Mugs had not met him as they had appointed. Chinook resumed his job, working feverishly, his mind racing. Why should anyone go to so much trouble to conceal a body, if he was dead, or do such a thing to him, if he was alive? It would be a lot easier and quicker to just bury him and maybe pile a few scattered stones over the place to hide the signs, rather than to have him standing upright, walled in from head to heels.

There was no visible sign of blood or any wound. Now, with enough stones out of the way, Chinook picked up the convict and lifted him out of his rocky prison, and felt a swift surge of hope. The rocks had kept Mugs standing upright, but he was still limp, not stiff. Which meant that he was unconscious, not dead.

His breath coming faster, Chinook stretched him out on the ground and looked around, his mind busy with the implications of this. The sun was bright overhead, but all at once it seemed to have lost its warmth. Here was something more, connected with Rialto and the way he worked—it had all the earmarks. But there was no sign of anyone around now, and Mugs was in bad shape.

Picking him up again, Chinook carried him down to the creek. There he set about trying to revive him, and presently Mugs coughed and strangled, as though he had swallowed some of the water poured over his face. A touch of color returned to his cheeks, then his eyes opened, staring vacantly. All at once they focused, and terror leaped into them—high, stark fear which was rawly unpleasant to see. He strove to sit up, moaned, and fell back.

“Steady, Old Timer, take it easy,” Chinook adjured, and set a hand behind his back, lifting him. “It’s all right. I’m Chinook, and you’re out of there.”

Recognition crept into Mugs’ eyes, and relief. Slowly the terror left his eyes as they roved to the line of willows and the creek. His glance brightened feverishly.

“Water!” he gasped.

Chinook helped him to drink, saw how much the water restored him, and waited. Presently, sighing, the old convict looked around normally.

"Chinook," he said. "I was never so glad to see anybody in my whole life!"

"Can't say that I blame you, even if it was only my homely mug," Chinook nodded. "What happened?"

Mugs shivered.

"The warden—let me out a day early," he explained. "Thought I mebby couldn't travel very fast. So I got here yesterday forenoon. And then they took me by surprise—" he stopped, covered his face with his hands, and shivered.

"Who?" Chinook prompted.

"Bunch of owlhooters," Mugs explained. "Three-four of them. Only one I knew was Killer Kurtch. Mebby you've heard of him?"

"I've done more than that," Chinook agreed. "I've had a few brushes with him."

That explained a lot. This entombing of a living man was right in line with the Killer's depraved instincts.

"They aimed to make me tell where that gold was hid—and when I wouldn't, they fixed me up that way an' left me," Mugs explained. "Kurtch said I'd be glad to talk, time they got ready to let me out. Or else they'd leave me in it, permanent. I—it was hell. And along toward mornin', I guess I kind of passed out—"

"Don't make any move, Chinook! We've got you covered with a brace of guns!"

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## Chapter XV

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CHINOOK stiffened. That was the voice of Killer Kurtch. He had been trying to keep a sharp look-out, knowing that this was dangerous country, but there had been nothing to see, and for the moment it had appeared safe enough. Yet somehow the Killer had slipped up on him. In confirmation, another voice spoke, from across the creek.

"And we'd just as soon salivate yuh as any other way!"

Chinook stood frozen, feeling Mugs grow rigid under his hands.

With both hands occupied in supporting the sick man, he was caught flat-footed, unable even to go for his own gun. And maybe it was just as well, for such a move, he realized, would be the signal for sudden death. Though to fall, for a third time, into the hands of this vindictive Killer—

He stood unmoving, while not two, but four men, stepped into sight. One of them was the Killer, his face vindictive but triumphant. The other man who had spoken, as he came splashing across the creek, was tall, with short, bristly hair which stood straight up, giving his broad, square face a particularly ugly look. But there was no sign of the Rattlesnake, who had apparently died in the river.

"Stand hitched," Kurtch adjured, and thrusting a gun muzzle into Chinook's face, he proceeded to help himself to Chinook's gun, then to search him swiftly.

"Figgered you'd be along," he said. "And we've been waitin' for yuh. Though how in blazes you ever got out of that hole, in the river, is more'n I can figger."

"You didn't aim for anybody to come out of it alive, did you—even your own pards?" Chinook taunted.

"Don't know what you're talkin' about," Kurtch growled. "But since you're here, mebby you can tell us what this stubborn old fool wouldn't spill yesterday—where to find that High Pockets gold. For we're going to have it."

"All I know," said Chinook. "Is that it's hidden somewhere around Hangtown."

The Killer snorted.

"Hell, we know that," he said. "But where? You might as well get gabby, for we're going to find out."

"I don't know," said Chinook. "And that's the truth."

"Mebby—mebby not. But Mugs knows—and some more of the same treatment, for the two of yuh, 'll mebby help to loosen a tongue or so. Or have you had enough already, Mugs?"

"I tell you I don't remember where it was I put it," Mugs protested hoarsely. "I've plumb forgot."

"And you still say to find that saddle, eh? Mebby we'll come to that—but I figger yuh can talk if you're a mind to, and I ain't in any hurry. Likewise, it'll be fun to give Chinook a dose of this same medicine. Smartest idea I ever did get. You won't find a way to get out of a rock pile, hombre, Even you ain't smart enough for that."

Since Mugs was almost too weak to walk, he was picked up and carried, and Chinook was marched at gun-point back up the slope. He

had a pretty good idea what Kurtch had in mind. If he could force them to tell where to find that gold, then he intended to kill them, and to inform Rialto that he had learned nothing. A case of the old double-cross, to have all the gold for himself, later on.

But if this method failed, then he could go on with them and turn them over to Rialto, explaining that he'd merely been working on them for the common purpose. The only hopeful thing here was that they might be better alive, for a while—or at least, Mugs might. But since the Killer was probably convinced that Chinook knew nothing of the actual location, he would likely leave him walled up to die by slow degrees, once he was tired of this sport.

Confirmation came as they reached the spot where he had found Mugs. The old convict was put back in what remained of his stone shell, then more stones piled around him, and, with two of them holding Chinook and at gun-point, the work of walling him in was begun as well.

"And you'll stay here long as these stones stand," Kurtch said viciously. His eyes narrowed. "That's a better coat than I got on. So shuck it and we'll trade. I wouldn't rob yuh!"

The exchange was effected, the grim work went on. Overhead, in the blue sky, a hawk wheeled, a mere speck in the immensity of space, the sun still held to its course. Grimly, inexorably, the rock wall around him was being built up, solid and unshakable, past his hips now, so that his arms were thrust down at his sides. Presently he was entombed except for his head. Kurtch chuckled, as he brought another stone.

"If you don't like this place we're fixin' for yore abode, Chinook, you might try bein' smart again and gettin' out of it," he guffawed. "Show how clever yuh really are!"

Chinook said nothing. It was useless to argue, to beg or to appeal to any decent instincts in the Killer, for he had already demonstrated that he had none. Things looked pretty hopeless, but he was still alive. That was the mistake which the Killer had made before. He was always so sure of himself, so anxious to gloat over a helpless prisoner—

Over his head they placed a final large, flat rock, resting on the walls which had been built up around him, and left him. It was half-dark inside now, though some light still filtered through the cracks between the stones. The horror of being walled in alive came upon Chinook, the cold sweat started on him.

But if it was bad for him, how much worse must it be for Mugs, who had been through the torment of it until he lapsed into uncon-

sciousness, only to be rescued and then placed for a second time in the same sort of jeopardy?

Silence had fallen now, in testimony that the outlaws had departed. They would plan to return again, but that would not be for some hours, at the least.

It was a terrible sort of silence. Chinook knew that he could break it by calling to Mugs, but he had no heart for talking. Not yet, at least. If he could offer some thread of hope, that would be different. Otherwise, it was just a mockery. So far as the old convict was concerned, he would soon lose consciousness again, if left as he was.

Chinook realized that it was growing cold in here, though when the sun went down, it would grow bitterly cold at this altitude. He could move a very little. The fingers of his hands moved readily, his left arm was not entirely constricted. By twisting and working, he presently managed to get his right arm to where it could move a little more than the left. He could also turn his head partly around. None of which helped much. It was impossible to get his hand up, with arm drawn back, so as to get a good shove at any of the stones which hemmed him in. Pushing with his body, he couldn't exert enough pressure to even jar them.

The aggregate weight of all the stones piled around him would run close to a ton, Chinook guessed. If he could find one weak spot and work at it—but how could he work when he couldn't move? Which was what Kurtch had counted on.

They had taken his gun, his belt, everything, including his coat. It wasn't likely that there would be anything in Kurtch's old coat that would be of any use. But now he set about exploring the pockets. Getting his hands into them was a slow, painful job, and the left-hand pocket was empty. The right-hand pocket had something which puzzled him at first. Then he pricked his finger, and understood. It was a nickel-plated badge—apparently a deputy sheriff's badge.

Kurtch must have taken it from Tom Mobray, when the deputy had been in his power. He'd dropped it into his coat pocket and forgotten all about it. But what good would a small flat piece of metal, with a pin attached to it, be to him in this fix?

Aside from the badge, there was nothing in the pocket except a hole. Having nothing better to do, Chinook explored it. He got two fingers through it, pulled up some of the slack of the hanging coat, began to explore the lining. Something might have dropped through that hole. He refused to consider the fact that anything which could slip through it would probably be completely useless.

He touched something small and round and hard, lost it, then recovered it again. The feel of it through the cloth puzzled him for a moment, then he understood. This was a revolver cartridge—evidently a forty-five, and loaded. Probably Kurtch had dropped a handful into his pocket at some time or other.

It took a lot of work to really get hold of it and get it actually in his fingers. The rock at the side kept scraping his arm and hand, but finally he got it around in front of him. He had to hold his breath, to make himself a little smaller, to manage it.

Chinook had a plan, now. It was long odds whether it would work, or not, but he could lose nothing by trying. And Kurtch, quite without intending to, had furnished him with what he needed for the try.

Patiently, since to drop either the cartridge or the deputy's badge would mean that he could never pick either of them up again, Chinook found a wedge-like spot between two stones, pushed the cartridge in between them. He got it back in as far as his finger would reach, where it fitted almost as snugly as in a gun-barrel. There was solid rock ahead of it, and a tight fit at the edges. Now, if he could manage to explode it, something might give.

Just what the result would be, Chinook could only guess. But a forty-five cartridge had a terrific lot of force, when fired in a gun. There the bullet could get out, of course. Here if he managed to set it off, it couldn't get out—and it might tear things up considerably in trying. It was a gamble. It might backfire at him. But if it did that, and failed otherwise, then a swift end would be more desirable than not.

Now he had to arrange the firing pin. The pin on the badge was as long as his finger, and strong. And the cartridge was center-fire. All of that was in his favor. But could he make it work?

Forcing himself not to hurry, Chinook got it in place, so that, though he couldn't see, he knew that the end of the pin was centered in the middle of the end of the cartridge. The other end, attached to the badge, was back in view, though he was getting cross-eyed and stiff-necked from trying to get a look at it in the confined space of the tomb.

It took another ten minutes of patient effort to work loose a small stone, which had been put in the wall as a sort of chinking. He couldn't haul the stone back and hit the pin a rap. At best, all he could do was to rap hard, in a short blow.

Giving a few practice, tentative taps, Chinook set his teeth and drove hard at it. The resultant explosion told him that he'd planned

and executed well, in so far as he was able. The roar, confined as it was, seemed thunderous, while flame and powder-reek licked back at him, and the whole monument of piled stones seemed to shake for a moment. Then, to his disappointment, is settled down as before.

Dismay choked him. Then, feverishly, he was reaching, working, tugging. They had been jarred and loosened a little by that blast, for he could move his right arm more easily now. A couple of stones had slipped a little. He tugged hard, felt one give, and suddenly the whole side of the pile in front of him was sliding, outward and down.

Sunlight, though the afternoon was well along now, poured on him, warm and friendly. If only there was no one around to have heard that gunshot blast, or to see now! It was only the work of moments until he had flung aside enough stones that he could crawl out to freedom.

Chinook took a quick look around, stretching cramped muscles. There was no one to see, and it was likely that the camp of the outlaws was some distance away. On the other hand, they might show up at any moment. Quickly he crossed to the pile of stones which prisoned Mugs and attacked it again.

"I'll have you out again in a hurry, Mugs," he promised. "How you making it?"

Mugs' voice came back, muffled, incredulous.

"That you, Chinook? You—yuh don't mean to tell me that you got out of there?"

"I was lucky," Chinook explained grimly. He saw that the old convict was badly used up as he helped him out a second time. But his eyes were still keen as he pointed.

"Them buzzards are comin' back to have a look," he said.

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## Chapter XVI

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LOOKING where he indicated, off beyond the creek, Chinook could just make them out—three horsemen. But at that distance it seemed unlikely that they could have heard the shot, or been warned by it. Probably they were heading back to see if Mugs was ready to talk yet, to gloat a little.

"They can't see us this far, yet," Chinook said. "Let's get down to the creek and hide."

Aiding the unsteady Mugs, they descended the rocky slope. The others were temporarily out of sight now, which was in their favor. But Chinook was appalled by the change in Mugs. Hope and excitement, the thrill of freedom, had buoyed him up so that he had ridden this far, but his recent experiences were taking their toll now. He was a sick man, and it showed plainly now.

They reached the creek, had a drink, and found hiding places in the brush. Now the others were close enough for him to recognize them again. Where the fourth man was, Chinook didn't know, and his absence worried him. If the fellow turned up unexpectedly, that could mean more trouble. On the other hand, he might have been despatched with a message to Rialto.

So far, it was apparent that Kurtch and the two with him were unsuspicious that anything had gone wrong. They headed for the creek, their horses splashed out into it, stopped, and sank thirsty noses into the water. One of them was Chinook's cayuse.

"I'm going to have a drink, too," Kurtch growled, and dismounted. "Wisht I had some whisky, but this'll be better'n nothin'."

He stretched flat on the shore to drink, and after a moment's hesitation, the others dismounted and followed his example. Then, leaving the horses cropping the scanty grass with dropped reins, they started up the slope toward the monuments, on foot.

Here was a real break, for each saddle carried a rifle in saddle-sheath. The complete confidence of Kurtch was shown in this act, but over-confidence could fool him as it had fooled Chinook a while before. Chinook moved fast. He reached the nearest cayuse, grabbed the bridle reins with one hand and jerked the rifle free with the other. As he did so, one of the trio glanced back, stared incredulously for a moment, then gave a startled yell.

Chinook was in the saddle now, turning the other horses back across the creek, so that they would be hidden by the brush. Mugs had been somewhat revived by a drink, and with Chinook's assistance he managed to climb stiffly into a saddle.

A bullet quested for them, and the outlaws, still shocked and incredulous at what was happening, were coming for them now, shooting as they came.

Here was a break—a big one, so far. But it wasn't working quite the way Chinook had hoped for. With rifles, and the horses, he had been sure, a moment before, of having the situation under control.

Rifles against six-guns would give them the odds, as well as having the horses. Only it wasn't working out that way.

The riderless cayuse had snorted and bolted wildly as gun-fire began, and though it was running so that none of the trio could catch it; it was getting away. That didn't particularly matter, but what was happening to Mugs did matter, plenty. The old convict's horse had started bucking, almost as soon as he was in the saddle.

In the old days, Mugs Farrington had been one of the toughest outlaws the country had ever known. There had been nothing on four legs that he couldn't ride. But that had been a long time ago. Now he was old and sick and stiff, and though his spirit was willing as ever, that was about all that he had to go on. In his weakened condition, he didn't last past the second jump. He hit the ground, then lay there, sprawled limply.

And as Chinook turned and tried to bring his rifle into action, a lucky revolver bullet smashed into his own cayuse, a fatal hit as he knew at once. The horse jumped convulsively, seemed to go off the ground with all four feet, then it went down, sprawling.

Kicking his feet free of the stirrups, Chinook managed to jump clear, but he fell sprawling as he reached the ground, then twisted around and got a little unsteadily to his feet. He saw with satisfaction that the shot he'd managed to fire had not been wasted. He had dropped one of the trio with it, but that left the odds still two to one, and six-guns were handier weapons at close range than a rifle.

Just one thing was in his favor now. Kurtch and the tall outlaw with the bristly hair were both pumping lead at him, but they were rattled and shooting pretty wild. He steadied, fired again—and saw the odds evened as the tall man measured a grave-length on the ground.

A jump carried Chinook across to his dead horse, and down behind the shelter of it, even as Kurtch ducked for the cover of a clump of brush. Savage satisfaction filled Chinook. He had a long score to settle with the Killer, but now it was between the two of them, man to man.

Rialto had built up a lawless legion with which to dominate the country. And Killer Kurtch was probably next to Rialto himself in command. If he could dispose of him, it would go a long way toward freeing the country of terror. Well, he'd ought to be able to smoke him out of there!

Chinook fired, working the gun, and he knew that he'd made a lucky hit. The revolver that had been clutched in Kurtch's hand gleamed

and spun in the last rays of the sinking sun. The bullet had struck either the gun, or Kurtch's hand, and for the moment he was disarmed.

But that, Chinook saw in the next breath, was only stalemate, for now his own rifle was empty, and he had no more cartridges for it. The extra shells would be in the belt, now strapped around Kurtch's middle.

The Killer was almost as quick to see what had happened, and to take advantage of it. Chinook had to give him credit for being a cool customer in a fight. Kurtch jumped out into the open, running, and as Chinook started in pursuit, he saw that he was after the gun that the first of the three had dropped. It was some distance away, up the slope, but if Kurtch got hold of it first, he could end things in a hurry. Chinook ran desperately, cutting the distance between them in half, but Kurtch reached the gun, snatched it up, turned and squeezed the trigger.

For an instant, rage and bafflement chased each other across his heavy face, as the hammer clicked emptily. Chinook was still coming on. Frantically, Kurtch turned again, heading now for the half-ruined piles of stones near the crest of the slope. If he could get to cover behind one of them, and have a moment to slip fresh shells into the gun, he'd have control of the situation.

Chinook didn't intend to give him that chance. He was still gaining. Kurtch reached the pile of rock where Chinook had been prisoned, and which still, on the one side, reared to a height of nearly eight feet. He ducked behind it, and Chinook flung his rifle the twenty feet remaining—hurtling through the air like a rocket.

It struck the rocks piled precariously near the top of the pile with a jarring crash, toppling them. There was a hoarse scream, cut off short, a farther crashing and tumbling of the loosened pile of stone.

By the time Chinook reached him, Killer Kurtch was all but buried under the pile that he had helped to build up, caught in the trap that his own twisted brain had conceived. One of the first stones had flattened his skull like an egg-shell.

Mugs was conscious, when Chinook returned to him. He made a somewhat ghastly effort to grin, but there was no humor in it.

"I ain't the man I used to be, Chinook," he admitted ruefully. "I'm plumb used up, and that's a fact." A spasm of coughing shook him, leaving him weak and spent.

"I—didn't aim—tuh be a drag on you," he went on. "But I guess—that's about all I am. You better go on without me. Reckon you can do better alone."

"We're in this together, Old Timer, and we'll see it through," Chinook said grimly. "Besides," he added, "you're the fellow who knows where to find that cached loot from the High Pockets mine."

"Mebby I do, and mebbly I don't," Mugs said, and something like discouragement crept into his voice. "Fact is, Chinook," he went on. "I don't remember too well about it—'cept at times. Like I told yuh, I got a bad rap on the head, once, and it bothers me more some times than others." He lay back for a moment with his eyes closed.

"There was times, there in the pen, when I remembered every detail, plain as day. If I'd a wrote 'em down, then, I'd be all right now. But I was scart to do that—and I always figgered I could remember all right, if I ever get out and back there. Mebbly I can, if I ever get there—mebbly not."

"But I thought you had it all fixed up in the saddle, and told how to find it, in that letter," Chinook reminded.

"That saddle was kind of queer, too," Mugs admitted. "I was stayin', I mind, with some Indians, for a while, when I fixed up that saddle. Had a young squaw helpin' me. She was good-lookin', and nice. Sure good to me—and I appreciated it. I recall her helpin'. But right now, danged if I can think how I fixed things up with that map, or whatever it was.

"When I wrote the letter, I just told about the saddle. If you can find that, mebbly you can dig it out of the saddle—mebbly not. I thought I was plumb clever at the time. Mebbly I was too clever. I wisht I could remember."

He stirred, shook his head impatiently.

"As it is, I ain't no good to you or nobody. You go on and try an' find George and Vivian. Find the saddle if you can. Just forget about me. It'll be enough, to die out under the open."

"There's a ranch, a few miles from here, as I remember," Chinook said thoughtfully. "I'll get you there, where you can have a chance to rest. Mebbly I'll go on and hunt for them, then. We'll see."

That program was duly carried out. Rounding up the horses, Chinook finally got Mugs to the ranch. By the next day he was no better, and his mind, as he confessed, was still going around in circles. A few days of rest might put him on his feet again, but meanwhile, Chinook was impatient to be heading for Ghost Ranch, for Hangtown, and what it might hold. So far as a mystery saddle, or even the lost loot from a fabulous robbery was concerned, he wasn't much interested. But if Vivian was there—

It would be a long way. He was heading now, back into the real

mountains at last. This was wilderness country again, with man and his veneer of civilization left well behind. For hours, now, Chinook had ridden up a long valley. High, sheer-rising hills, thick carpeted with pine and spruce, had been crowding the valley for miles, as though intent on crowding it out of existence.

Back a couple of hours and half a dozen miles, it had been three or four miles across. Now it had narrowed to hardly a quarter of a mile, and the road itself, if road it could be called—for only far-spaced overland wagons had apparently traveled here, and none recently—the road, roughly laid out, winding and twisting among the trees, was all but lost in the rising immensity of the mountains. Men had probably traveled this road in the heyday of Hangtown, when it had been a booming camp instead of a place of ghosts and forgotten hopes.

He'd been traveling pretty steady since morning, and ought to be close to the half-way mark, Chinook figured. Then, with a sharp glance at the already westering sun, and impatience still a strong tug in his blood, his leg muscles tensed involuntarily, preparatory to applying the spurs.

That act of urgency was never completed, for something even more urgent hammered on the air at that moment—the heavy, reverberating smash of a Sharps rifle, followed, before the shaking echoes had quite died away, by a second blast from the gun. Then, as the echoes finally did fade among the hills, there was an even more startled silence.

For a moment, Chinook sat immobile, like a carved statue in the saddle. He had left the pack horse back at the ranch, so as to travel fast, and there had been no sign of any of the outlaw pack for hours—nowhere at all today, in fact. But such gun-talk was ominous in itself.

Now he rode forward again, but this time he proceeded at an easy jog, every sense alert. There had been, he reflected wryly, too much of blundering already. He couldn't afford it again—not when he had the scent of danger strong and rank in his nostrils.

Abruptly, a new sound grew upon the whispering stillness of the hills—the pound of hoofs, those of a horse running wildly, raggedly. A moment later the horse topped a rise in the road a stone's-throw ahead and came on—a brown cayuse, long in the barrel, hammer-headed. It was foam-flecked and its skin showed darker for sweat. And it ran with the reins, tied together, flopping loosely on its neck, while its rider sagged in the saddle, both hands clutched in a death-grip around the horn.

His face was drained of all color, its chalky whiteness doubly ap-

parent by contrast with the fresh, brightly bubbling red which stained his shirt front and dribbled on down. His eyes were tightly closed, his mouth partly open. It was apparent that the reach of one of those bullets, whose thunder Chinook had heard, had reached across space to stop him. And, though it hadn't stopped him then, it was doing so now.

That much, Chinook saw in the first quick look. Then he had caught the trembling cayuse and eased it to a stop. It seemed willing enough, standing with head drooping, still snorting feebly in a subsiding terror, while Chinook dismounted and eased the wounded man down. For a moment that was difficult, for the hands were stiff, hard to unclasp.

Then Chinook, having a better look at the blood-smeared face, drew back momentarily, appalled. For he knew this man. It was Jem—the deputy sheriff who had assisted Barkley in placing him under arrest, back on that day when he had come upon Tom Mobray in the power of the Killer and his pack.

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## Chapter XVII

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CHINOOK saw then that Jem was not unconscious, as he had believed at first, nor dead—though he wasn't far from either. His eyes opened slowly at the feel of Chinook's hands, staring blankly for a moment, then focusing with growing intelligence on Chinook's face. Sudden recognition and eagerness came into it, and his lips opened, but no word came.

He was trying hard to speak now, and not making it. Sensing what he needed, Chinook stretched him flat on the soft carpet of pine needles, hurried to where the small gurgle of water proclaimed a stream, though it was hidden by the tangle of trees and brush. He filled his hat, returned to the wounded deputy.

Assisted, Jem drank eagerly as the hat was held to his lips, while Chinook observed with tightening lips that both heavy rifle slugs had found a mark. For a moment, the water seemed to give the hard-hit man the strength he craved so urgently.

"Chinook—thank God," he murmured. "I was hopin'—to mebbey find

you." He paused, and Chinook realized that his words would be few, and that the wounded man knew it.

"Barkley—and Mobray, sent me to Hangtown—to try and find Vivian," he explained. "I did. And that's the saddle, on my cayuse. Watch out—they're after it. I was tryin'—"

His voice faltered, broke. He was still looking up at Chinook, but Chinook knew that he would never speak again.

Gently, Chinook eased him down on the pine needles again, looked swiftly around. Jem had said that he had found Vivian, but he had been able to add no details as to that. If only he could have told a little more—just a little more.

But he had said that this was the saddle, on his cayuse. And that they were after it. That must mean that it was the mystery saddle, the one which Mugs had fixed up long years before, and which had been hidden somewhere in Hangtown. How the deputy sheriff had found it, or been able to be sure that it was *the* saddle, were still unanswered questions.

But the fact that the outlaws of Rialto's gang were after it, that they had shot Jem because they were convinced that it was the saddle—there could be no doubting that. And the last warning of the dying man was one that he would do well to heed. The killer, or killers, might be along at any moment, trying to overtake the man whom they must know had been hard hit.

This was a desperate game for high stakes, which was being played out in these hills. He had been furnished ample proof of it before, but the ante was steadily rising.

Even as Chinook straightened, he heard the sound of hoof-beats on the old road again, distant, but coming swiftly closer. And at least two horses were coming this time.

Chinook moved fast. He carried the dead man back, behind a big clump of small trees which fringed the road. Leading the two horses, he had them out of sight as well a moment before the horsemen topped the rise, which, viewed from this direction, was a dip in the road. They had slowed to a walk, climbing the slope, and that had given him a few seconds.

Gun in hand, Chinook watched as the pair urged their horses to a trot again. The cayuses showed the effects of a long hard run, as did the horse which Jem had been riding. They were blowing, almost spent. Regardless of that, the two tried to spur them to a run. Which suited Chinook well enough. If they would just go on past, without

noticing, that was all to the good. Though, if they wanted trouble now, he was in the mood to give them plenty.

They were drawing closer now. One, he saw, was Lefty—one of the men who had aimed to kill George Ford in the saloon at Birdseye, who had later slugged the stable-man and ridden off for the Turkey Track along with Hobe. But the other man was not Hobe.

Then Chinook recognized him as well. It was the parson—that bogus individual who had been dragged in to perform a wedding ceremony for Rialto and Vivian, using a book of card games for a prayer-book. And one, or both of them, had pumped lead into Jem.

Either the pair of them were over-eager now, or else they were out of their natural environment, as saloon hangers-on, and no good at reading signs. Both of them kept going without a pause, and they were soon out of sight, down the road the way Chinook had come.

Chinook drew a deeper breath, started to holster his gun, then held on to it. A third rider was coming now—and riding with frantic haste, from the sound. He watched as this rider came into sight, saw the raking glance which seemed to take in every detail, then this rider was starting to pull up—and Chinook was out in the road, eagerly. For this third rider was Vivian Ford.

She saw him at the same moment, then she was almost tumbling out of the saddle, surprise and eagerness and welcome in every line of her. Almost as a matter of course, Chinook caught her as she sprang down, then she was in his arms, clinging to him.

"Chinook!" she said, and there was more in the one word, and the way she said it, than whole books might tell.

"Vivian!" he answered, as tensely. "You're all right?"

"Of course I'm all right—now," she agreed, and for a moment there was a teasing light in her eyes. It faded almost instantly.

"Jem," she gasped. "I heard the shots—did you see him—?"

"He's back here, behind those trees," Chinook explained. "He was just about finished when he came along."

"You mean—?" her eyes widened.

"They'd put two slugs through him," Chinook nodded. "Lefty and the parson. I was plumb tempted to stop them when they came along, but I let them go by, just to be on the safe side."

Her face cleared a little.

"I'm glad that you did," she said. "They're a bad pair—and they're not alone. We—we'll have to get farther away than this. They'll be back."

Chinook understood what she meant. Half a mile on ahead, the

way they were riding, the road straightened, ran for a mile without a bend. When they came to that point, as they would already be doing, and failed to see any horse ahead, they would be suspicious. Worse, there was a spot where a creek crossed the road, and in the mud on either side were the fresh tracks of his own horse, heading this way—and no sign of any other horse having been there recently. Sign which they couldn't fail to read.

Like a voice in confirmation, the big Sharps which Lefty had been carrying roared out suddenly from down the road—two close-spaced shots, a momentary pause, then two more. Vivian's face was pale as she looked at Chinook.

"They're signaling to Rialto," she breathed.

"Is he alone?" Chinook asked quickly.

"No. Far from it."

"Then maybe we'd better travel a little," Chinook said regretfully. While she held the skittish cayuse, he lifted the dead deputy, tied him quickly fast in the saddle, then the two of them, leading the other horse, worked back into the trees.

But that was tricky business, Chinook realized. Those high hills on either side which crowded the valley so closely, likewise barred their way from much chance of escape, and the gunmen would know that as well as he did, and be swift to take advantage of it. But now it was Vivian who took the lead, going swiftly, confident, and so Chinook followed without question. She appeared to know this country, which was more than he did.

There were a lot of questions that he was eager to ask her, but they would have to wait. All at once the hill was ahead of them, a solid barrier which proved no more substantial than a door being opened, as she led the way into a canyon mouth and rode up it. After a moment she turned to flash him a brief, strained smile.

"I knew of this canyon," she confessed. "But I don't know where it goes. Maybe even a blind pocket that we're riding into."

"Good idea, anyway," Chinook approved. "We'll get somewhere."

The canyon was high-walled, deep and dark, but it seemed their best chance. Down in here, darkness was already settling, and it would be everywhere in another half-hour. They should easily be able to keep ahead of their pursuers for that long.

"What happened to you?" Chinook asked, unable to bottle up his curiosity any longer.

"Rialto kidnapped me," she explained. "And took me to Hangtown. He wanted me as a hostage, I guess, and later on, to make me

marry him anyway. But he treated me all right," she added, seeing the look in Chinook's eyes. "I—I think he really cares for me, in his way."

"Damn him," Chinook growled.

Vivian flashed him a sudden smile.

"I'm all right," she repeated. "I guess I'm luckier than I deserve. Jem found me, and set me free, when no one was around. And they had finally found that saddle, hidden in an old building there in Hangtown. I don't know just how they knew, but they were sure of it being the right one. They looked it over, but couldn't find anything, in their first examination. And then Jem managed to swipe it, almost right from under their eyes, and get away with it. He went on ahead—and they followed. I—I guess that's about all there is to it."

Chinook glanced at the saddle. It was an ordinary-enough appearing saddle, outwardly, to be the cause of all this intrigue and murder—just another big hunk of leather, shaped and ornamented with carved leather, like the one on his own horse. Apparently Vivian had seen nothing of George.

Now the canyon branched, and this was luck, for it was hard rock underfoot, and in the dark, those behind could never tell which way they had gone. Another half-mile led them up and out, still among the hills and trees, and here they paused to make a crude grave, covering it over with stones as big as Chinook could lift. Vivian said a short prayer, and her voice was deep, husky with emotion. Then they mounted again.

"That's all we can do for him—now," Chinook said, his voice grim. "And he should rest as easy there as anywhere. This is nice country."

"Yes," Vivian agreed, simply. "The kind he liked."

Chinook could understand that. He had been born and raised in open prairie country, but he liked the mountains. There was a sense of primeval strength, of unchanging security to them, which was somehow absent from the flatlands. The majesty of a great cathedral, the peace, when men left a country alone, of untouched solitudes. There was ever the soft whispering of the pines, the fragrance of them embroidered on the air; their age-old carpet of needles was a luxury which no millionaire's house could approach.

Far above them, yet somehow close and friendly, the stars looked down. A night-bird raised its voice in plaintive cry, fell silent again. A pair of greenish eyes gleamed at them from a thicket and vanished, where a small night prowler sought his supper. A thin edge of moon showed over the rim of the mountain.

They had the sadddle now, and the thing to do would be to get back with it to Mugs, and let him tell them its secret. Once he had it in his hands again, he should remember it well enough. It had been a piece of luck, getting hold of it this way. Though keeping it and getting out of here again might not be easy.

They seemed to have lost their pursuers, and it didn't pay to run a horse to death. If trouble came, you could go a lot farther and faster with a fresh cayuse under you.

"Here's a coulee," Chinook said. "Maybe we'd better stop for a few hours' sleep."

He was debating how to tell her about Mugs, and still keep the old convict's secret. She knew of that letter, but that was all she did know. Now she pulled up as he suggested.

Deep within the coulee, sheltered by its high walls and a thick hedge of brush and trees, they built a small fire and cooked supper from Chinook's supplies. Vivian, he saw, seemed perfectly at home in this sort of a situation. With bacon curling to a crisp brown in the skillet, he spoke.

"I've found out some more about that letter—the one that was addressed to you."

"Yes?" Vivian flashed him a quick glance, then divided the supper onto two tin plates. She poured the coffee, from the tin can which he had brought along, stuffed in his duffel-bag, into tin cups, and sat back on the opposite side of the fire from him, drinking her own, unsweetened, like any man. But the glint of the fire-light in her hair was somehow disturbing. She wasn't like a man, and Chinook found it hard to keep his mind on his story.

"Sheriff Barkley found out about him," he explained. "Old-timer that used to know yore folks. Name of Farrington. They call him Mugs Farrington."

He was watching her closely, but plainly the name meant nothing to her. Chinook went on, a little more easily.

"I went to see him, He's in pretty bad shape. But he knows where there's some old treasure hid, and he wanted you and George to find it and turn it in for the reward. The secret of it is in the saddle, as you've maybe guessed."

"So that's what it's about?" Vivian asked. "But it looks ordinary enough—the saddle, I mean."

"Sure does," Chinook conceded. He added more details, without telling too much. Mugs could do his own explaining as to motives, when they met him again. For the present, Vivian seemed satisfied.

"We'll head back to him, first thing we do," Chinook added. "Come daylight, we might take a better look at the saddle. I'm right curious about it. But I've a hunch that it won't be easy to figure its secret out."

"I guess I'll catch a couple of winks then," Vivian said matter-of-factly, and wrapped herself in a blanket on the far side of the fire. Chinook did the same, on his side, but he lay long awake, after the even breathing from across the dying embers told him that his companion was asleep. He was sure of only one thing. She was a partner to ride the river with.

Chinook awoke, realizing that he had slept much later than he had intended. Vivian was up and starting breakfast. She greeted him with a smile, crossed to his pack for more supplies, and turned swiftly, her face ashen.

"Chinook!" she gasped. "It's gone—stolen! The saddle!"

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## Chapter XVIII

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CHINOOK whirled in surprise, then moved quickly to her side. Certainly the saddle was gone from where he had left it with the others the night before, and that could mean only one thing. Somehow their pursuers had followed them here, and, seeing their chance, had made away with the saddle under cover of darkness.

His first sensation was one almost of relief—that they would be content to swipe the saddle and not bother them. That was proof that, while these men probably belonged to Rialto's gang, that Rialto himself was not with them. But that notion gave way to amazement.

The thing was doubly surprising—not merely that the thieves could follow and find them in the night, in such country, no mean feat in itself, but that anyone could sneak in and make away with a saddle without awakening him. Chinook was a light sleeper, especially when danger lurked.

Vivian's face was strained when she looked at him.

"We were careless—awfully careless," she whispered. "And now—"

Chinook cast a quick look around. In the daylight, it was certain that, if anybody should be close enough to spy on them, they certainly

could not be near enough to overhear anything that was said. And the former, under the circumstances, was exceedingly unlikely.

"Don't take it too hard," he said. "We've had callers all right, from the looks. But they made a little mistake too. It was my saddle that they made off with. It looked a lot like the other, and seems to've fooled them in the dark." He grinned slowly. "Likewise, just in case, I kind of hid mine and sort of tied it down, while leavin' the other out in the open, careless. I didn't expect them to come, but it worked."

Relief flowed back into her face.

"You've got brains, Chinook," she said. "I—I take back what I called you—once." Color stained her face.

"Reckon I had that coming, too," Chinook confessed. "As it is, we'd better try and profit by this deal. We'll eat, then travel out of here a while, before we have a look. I aimed to be on the trail an hour ago."

"You've been doing a lot of traveling lately and having it pretty hard," Vivian pronounced, with a sharp look at him. "You look tired and you needed the rest."

He questioned her now about her brother, but she had seen nor heard nothing of him. While she packed the few dishes, after scrubbing them in sand and rinsing them in the little spring which bubbled from under a mossy boulder farther up the coulee, Chinook saddled the horses. He inspected the mystery saddle closely as he cinched it on to his grunting cayuse.

Outwardly it looked very much like his own saddle, as he had noted the day before. To the casual eye, there was nothing different about it, and whatever ruse Mugs had used, years before, the secret must be well hidden in it.

The first thing was to elude their pursuers, the second, to get back to Mugs with the saddle. Once the outlaws had convinced themselves that they had grabbed the wrong piece of leather in the dark, they would be after him again. And while there was no sign of them, so far, this country was deceiving. If he could get a clue as to what this was all about, that would be good insurance.

Riding, with the girl at his side, it was hard to realize that danger lurked, hard to keep his mind on other matters. At the end of a couple of hours they risked a stop at a place where, hidden themselves, they could see the approach of anyone else from a long way off.

Together they examined the saddle minutely, inch by inch, pulling away some of the padding on the under side, going over it carefully. Chinook stopped before the search had proceeded far.

"Someone else has had a look at this—maybe several looks," he said. "See where some of the thread has been cut, that holds two sections of leather together, here."

Vivian nodded.

"It's probably been gone over more than once," she agreed. "But I don't believe anyone has ever found what it holds—a map, or whatever it is."

"No, I don't think so, either," Chinook conceded. "I've an idea that Mugs had some pretty smooth plan, when he did fix it up. I hope he can remember it, when he gets the saddle again."

For a while longer, reluctant to admit defeat so easily, they kept up the search, tapping, prodding, doing everything that they could think of, except to cut the saddle to pieces. But without result. Outwardly it was just another saddle. Finally Chinook slung it back on his horse again.

"We'd better be getting out of here," he said. "Right now, I need it to ride in. And so long as Mugs can probably go right to whatever it holds, we're foolish to waste time with it. No telling what may turn up."

He spoke more cheerfully than he felt. Rialto had somehow located this saddle, in the old ghost town, and had been certain that it was the right one—sufficiently sure that murder had been committed for it, once more. But Rialto might have been mistaken, Maybe that saddle never would turn up again.

Vivian pointed, as he turned. Off about a mile, where the slope of the valley broadened to permit a view, they had a momentary glimpse of a pair of riders, outlined on a hilltop. The two were heading their way. They vanished, but like a conjuring act, their place was taken by a second pair.

"Looks like they were hopin' to pay us a call," Chinook said. "And I'd just as soon that they didn't. We'll see what we can do about losin' them."

He led the way now, devoting his whole attention to confusing the trail. But it became increasingly clear, as the day wore on, that the quartette were after them again, holding doggedly on despite all the tricks which he was able to resort to in an effort to confuse them or throw them off the trail entirely. Finally he looked back from a rise, frowning.

"We're just about holding our own," he said. "And I don't like that any too well. Let's follow this creek for a while. There seem to be

several smaller streams joinin' it every now and then, and if we keep in the water, and turn up another one, we'll give them something real to puzzle over."

His admiration for his companion increased. This was hard work, unpleasant going, with the horses slipping and sliding, splashing water over them; low-hanging branches whipping them in the face, and, now and again, the horses stumbling suddenly into deeper water, once or twice nearly immersing their riders as well as themselves. But Vivian took it all without complaint, was able to come up smiling. And the real danger which dogged their trail did not worry her, outwardly at least.

Luck was with them, in one respect. There were no ducks or other wild-fowl on this stream, to rise up in sudden flight which would be a clear signal to their enemies. Now and again some small rodent, a mink or muskrat, slipped into the deeper water at their approach, and once a beaver hit the water with a loud splash of its tail as they came past. Magpies fluttered away in the brush, smaller birds stared saucily at them and went on with what they were doing, uncaring and untroubled.

They reached another stream, turned up it. Finally, with a considerable distance between themselves and their last glimpse of pursuit, and with a rocky beach offering a good place to do so, they left the water again.

"Thank goodness!" Vivian sighed. "I feel like a muskrat or something, myself."

"You look a lot nicer than any muskrat I ever saw." Chinook informed her.

"I must look a sight," she protested. "My hair's every which way, I know—"

"Makes you prettier'n ever," Chinook insisted. "But I think that ought to delay them plenty, and our best bet, right now, will be to lie low for a while and let them wear themselves out. Give us a chance to find a sunny spot and dry off."

Finding a brush-bordered glade, he stripped the saddles off the horses, partly to rest the cayuses, partly so that they could examine the mystery saddle again. For it intrigued him, and he hated to admit defeat. Lifting it down, he halted, staring.

When he had slung the saddle on to his horse a few hours earlier and had tightened the cinch, that same cinch had been a dull-colored,

ordinary appearing gray. Beyond that, he hadn't even looked at it particularly. But now, though a part of the cinch was still gray, other parts of it looked like a rainbow which had been dipped in mud and only partly washed off again. The gray, mud-like effect still showed even there, but underneath it were a variety of colors in various strange patterns.

Chinook blinked, and looked again. But it was no dream, nor was this just an ordinary cinch. It wasn't made of hair, nor of ordinary woven cords. He could see now that the cords were actually made up of many small threads, tightly woven—and he could make out practically every known color, from white to black to green and red.

His breath came a little faster. Here, by pure chance, was the saddle's secret. They had been going on the assumption that whatever map or paper might be hidden, would be concealed somewhere in the saddle itself. No one had ever given more than a passing glance at the dull gray cinch.

Chinook called Vivian, who exclaimed in surprise.

"Mugs said something to me, about fixing this up in an Indian camp, and with one of the squaws helpin' him do it," Chinook explained. "But he seemed to have forgotten more than that. Reckon she helped him with weaving and dyeing, to make this cinch. Then he smeared it with that gray color, which would wash off, but not too easy."

"It's certainly clever," Vivian said admiringly.

It was a clever piece of work. More so than he expected to find. But Mugs, when he had done this job, had been an outlaw, with a fortune which he still hoped to spend for himself at some future time. He had sought to guard against what had later come to pass—an accident which had affected his memory. But he had taken as few chances as possible in doing it.

Looking carefully, they saw that there were colors here of every sort. Some of these were separate. Others were woven together—blue and red, white and green, yellow and purple, and so on. It was plain enough that it was all woven into some sort of a code.

"Now, if we can get it back to Mugs, or figure it out," Chinook said. "Then we'll be settin' pretty—right on top of a powder keg with the fuse lit!"

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Chapter XIX

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"IT'S A CODE, of course," Vivian said, pulling thoughtfully at her lower lip, red now as a sunripened cherry. "I can see that much. But I'm pretty hopeless that way. I suppose the thing to do now is to get back to Mugs as soon as possible."

"Guess that's right," Chinook agreed. "Though I'd like to have a try at solving it myself, just for the fun of it. Let's see. Every color, or combination of colors, probably represents some letter of the alphabet. Like those roses in your cheeks!"

"And if we figure out which is which, then we can unravel the puzzle," Vivian smiled at him. "In other words, it's a cinch!"

"Sure," Chinook grinned back, but his mind was filled with the picture of a desperate, hunted man in an Indian village, patiently weaving his secret in such a manner, while he dared make no other move for fear of the law relentlessly on his trail. And of that same man now, old and sick, and desiring to make restitution, to clear the sheet of a few blots before he took the last long trail westward, and to help these unsuspecting relatives of his, whom he believed to be in need of help. There was a lump in Chinook's throat as he fell to studying the pattern again. "You've got the idea."

"But not the right one," Vivian added. "Though there seem to be a lot of green threads in it. That might stand for E, I suppose. They say that E is used more often than any other letter."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you're right about that. There is a lot of green."

"And now we only need to figure out the other twenty-five letters!" Vivian sighed, and made a little face. "I don't know where to go on from there, though."

"We'll work it out," Chinook continued his patient study, and Vivian could see that he was fascinated by the puzzle. As she had already discovered, his was a mind that reacted strongly to any challenge, any puzzle. The more difficult and impossible it seemed to be of solution, the more he enjoyed finding a way. She had never known another man like him.

For her own part, she had to confess that it looked like a hopeless

task, without knowing the key. If they had plenty of time, they might work it out eventually. But it didn't look to her as if there would be much time, and so long as there was Mugs to solve it anyway—

"Hadn't we better keep traveling—till we find Mugs?" she asked, and Chinook nodded approval. He slung the saddle back on the horses, but rode then in an abstracted silence. Vivian, knowing that he was puzzling over some angle of the pattern, said little.

"We'll be able to swing out through a canyon, ahead, then swing south again," she said finally. "I—"

She pulled her horse up suddenly, and Chinook was doing the same, but it was too late. They had just come out from a dense growth of brush on to more open trail, and in that moment had seen someone, and had been seen at the same moment, from there in the trail ahead. Chinook's hand was dropping toward his gun-butt, when Vivian exclaimed with relief.

"It's Packy," she said. "I've known him for a long time. How are you, Packy?"

Packy had the look of a prospector, even though he was on a horse now, seeming rather strange and ill at ease there. He was a man who belonged to more open country, plodding along at the heels of a burro. He peered at them from faded, uncertain eyes, and bobbed his heavy, graying thatch nervously.

"Howdy, Miss Vivian," he agreed. "Shore it's me. Hain't seen you in a right long spell."

"No," Vivian agreed. "It's been a long time. You still prospecting?"

"Yep. Reckon I'll be strikin' it, pretty soon now. That grub-stake yore brother give me last fall helped a lot. I'm findin' color—"

Chinook was anxious to be on their way, but now, after his initial shyness, the old prospector seemed starved for someone to talk to, and it was not easy to break away. Then, from somewhere behind, came the sound which Chinook had been straining his ears for—the sound of other horses.

"Sorry, old-timer," he said. "But we'll have to be going—"

He stared in blank amazement at the gun which was suddenly covering them, the change in the desert rat's face. It was as though a rabbit had suddenly turned on a pack of hounds.

"Not just yet, you won't," Packy warned. "Just stay put till them others get here. I reckon they're kind of anxious to talk to you."

"Why, Packy!" Vivian was shocked, reproachful. "I thought we could trust you. I've known you so long—"

"Guess yuh have," Packy conceded. "They sort of counted on that,

that yuh'd figger I was harmless and so I could mebbly slip up on you from the blind side, as it were. I been in this country quite a spell now, and been huntin' gold, all right—but it's gold from the High Pockets! And I reckon I'm gettin' on the trail of it at last!"

The big gun in his hand was unwavering. Chinook was disgusted. First George Ford had been fooled by one of his own crew, and now Vivian had been deceived in much the same fashion. But it all added up to the cleverness of one man—Rialto. He had infiltrated his gang of outlaws into every strata of society, scattering them throughout this country.

Various hold-ups and robberies had paid good wages while they worked toward the big treasure which Rialto was so determined to find. And now, despite everything, they were prisoners again—or soon would be. Already, the quartette who had been on their trail were coming into sight. Helpless under the muzzle of the gun, Chinook could only wait and fume.

There was Lefty and the parson, whom he had seen on the trail of Jem the day before. Besides them, Hobe had joined with them again, one of the killers from the saloon at Birdseye. The fourth man was a stocky, sleek-looking hombre, and he carried a pair of field-glasses in addition to his gun. Odds of five against them now. But there was no sign of Rialto.

It was soon apparent that, from some hill-top, and using the field-glasses the outlaws had seen them, had even watched them working on the rainbow hued cinch, and so had guessed already that it held the secret. The old procedure of disarming and searching him followed, Chinook's hands were tied behind his back. But at least, this bunch was not so blood-thirsty as the Killer.

With Vivian disarmed and tied as well, their captors lost no time in starting to study the pattern of the cinch. They were like a pack of hounds on a hot scent. And once again, Chinook saw with disgust, it was the old pattern. No honor among thieves. They were working for Rialto, moving under his direction. But if they could learn the secret for themselves and double-cross him and others of the gang, they would have no compunctions about doing so.

Vivian was watching in dismay, blaming herself for assuring Chinook that Packy was a friend and could be trusted. But that had been natural enough, Chinook knew. After a man had accepted a grubstake from a family, he was nothing less than a rat to turn against them. That was the sort that Rialto had gathered about him—rats!

But it was soon apparent, to the slyly amused Chinook, that the code

which Mugs had woven into the cinch was even more of a puzzle to them than it had been to him. His hope grew as he watched them. They studied it, turning it one way and then another, and then the truth began to dawn on Vivian. These men could barely read or write. Faced with something like this, they were stumped.

They were reacting now as Chinook had counted on—rage growing with their frustration. Lefty swung suddenly on him, snarling.

"You got that thing figgered out?" he demanded.

"How should I have?" Chinook asked, shrugging. "Do you think I'm any smarter than the rest of you?"

"Don't get smart, now. What we want to know is where that High Pockets loot is cached—and we aim to find out."

"I've a hunch that he's got it worked out in his mind, Lefty," Hobe said softly, now. "I been watchin' him, while the rest of you was foolin' with that. I'm bettin' that he knows it."

Chinook shot a startled glance at him. Here was a dangerous antagonist, a man who used his brains to good advantage, rather than depending on brute force. He might not be able to do much at reading or writing, but he knew how to think. And he had come uncomfortably close to the truth. Chinook did have a pretty good hunch now as to the code. But, beneath the mask of his poker face, he hid a smile. They were playing now into his hands.

"If you'd let me really study it for a while, maybe I could make somethin' of it," he suggested. "Though I'm not sure."

"Best way'd be to find Mugs and make him do it," Hobe said. "Where's he at?"

"The Killer caught him," Chinook growled, and his face set in harsh lines. "Do you think I'd be here without him, otherwise?"

The mention of Killer Kurtch was convincing. Lefty's face twisted in a snarl.

"That damn fool!" he hissed. "Somebody'll slip a knife in his ribs, one of these days—and serve him right! Well you go ahead and have a look at this thing. We'll cook some grub an' eat, while you're doing it."

"I'll have to be able to use my hands."

"That's all right. We'll be watchin' yuh."

Chinook shrugged. He had a pretty good idea now of the code, and just how dangerous such knowledge could be. But its possession could likewise be a weapon, if properly used. And right now, he and Vivian needed such a weapon badly.

One section here was the key. That was divided into twenty-six sections, which of course must mean A to Z. Red was A, green was E. Many

letters were represented by two colors, woven together. Now it wasn't so difficult to decipher.

"You got it?" Lefty demanded abruptly.

Chinook shook his head.

"Not much chance of getting it, I'm afraid," he said. "It's too deep for me."

"He's got it, Lefty," Hobe pronounced. "All we have to do now is to make him squeal."

"That won't be hard." Lefty's smile was like that of a puma, waiting on a limb. "I been waitin' quite a while for a chance to settle accounts for the way yuh made a fool of us, back at that saloon. And I done plenty of that sort of thing before."

"Yore methods are too crude, Lefty," Hobe pronounced. "And they won't work with him. He's a different feathered bird than we ordinary get hold of. I got a better notion. One that'll make him sing."

"Such as what?"

"He's fallen hard for the girl. See how he looks at her? So get a couple ropes over that tree limb. Then we'll string her up—by her thumbs. 'Less he starts talkin' first."

"Yuh *have* got brains, Hobe," Lefty conceded grudgingly.

Chinook went cold. Hobe was uncanny, in his ability to read a man's mind. And he saw that they intended to do it. Scruple had no part in their make-up. Vivian looked at him, white-faced, but her eyes were bright with defiance.

"Don't tell them a thing, Chinook," she said. "Not a thing."

"It's not worth it, to have you hurt," Chinook returned, and wondered what he was getting into. This was working pretty much as he had figured, though they didn't know that. But there were other things that he didn't know, either—things shadowy and grim, which might prove to be a death-trap for all of them. But there was nothing to do but go ahead.

"I'll tell you fellows what I can make out," he added. "Whether it's any good or not, I couldn't say."

"It'd better be good," Lefty warned. "All right, spill it."

"Near as I can make out, the stuff is hid down in a place called the Sag. You know anything about that?"

"Yeah. It's a spot dropped out of hell, coverin' mebbly a hundred acres. Ten miles or so from Hangtown. I thought the stuff was in Hangtown."

"So did I," Chinook confessed. "But maybe that was just a blind.

This says the Sag. And in it, there's a place called the Cave of the Devils. Want I should show you how to read this?"

Lefty shook his head, eyes gleaming with excitement.

"We'll let you tell us," he said. "Since you're a stranger in this country, I don't reckon yuh could be makin' that all up. Cave of the Devils, did you say? There used to be an old prospector, of that name, had a sort of a prospect down in the Sag, years ago. He died from eatin' some of his own cookin'."

"They say the place is haunted now," the parson said, uneasily.

Hobe laughed, harshly.

"What'd it be called the Devil's Cave for, otherwise?" he asked.

"Who cares? If the stuff's there, we'll find it."

Vivian looked at Chinook, a little doubtfully. She realized that he was doing this for her sake, of course, but she wished that he hadn't told them. Certain now that they had the secret they were after, the outlaws were not minded to waste any time.

"What do we do with them?" Packy asked callously. "Knock 'em over the head?"

"That'd be a fool notion—till we have our hands on the gold," Hobe snapped. "We'll go have a look first."

They saddled up and started again, with Chinook and Vivian tied uncomfortably in their saddles. And Hobe, who had tied him this time, knew how to tie a man, Chinook had to confess grudgingly. There was no chance to slip his hands loose now.

Gradually the country grew more broken, with occasional stunted trees in place of the forest giants that had gone before. Then ahead of them was the Sag itself—which Lefty had called a place dropped out of hell.

The phrase was descriptive. The vegetation was scanty, down in here, and there was a smell as of sulphur and brimstone. There were raw, glaring fissures, bubbling mud pots and cracks which sent up the stench and smoke. It was an unlovely place, but Chinook had seen its like once or twice before in the West.

"Packy, you used to fool around here," Lefty suggested. "You know where this Cave of the Devils is?"

"Yeah, I know where it is," Packy agreed, but without enthusiasm, while the parson's face had gone almost a sickly green at the prospect ahead of them. "But I don't like this country. It's bad stuff." He pointed to a dark opening in the cliff-side of a small hill, near the middle of the Sag. "That's it, off there."

"Sure looks like hell had cracked open," Hobe said distastefully, surveying the reeking, smoke-filled interior of the Sag. "But we'll go have a look."

"We better go careful," the parson warned nervously. "That cave might be full of gas or bad air, back inside. Kill us 'fore we knew it."

Lefty chuckled unpleasantly.

"That's where these two come in handy," he said. "They'll walk ahead of us, with hands tied and a rope around their ankles to trip 'em if they try runnin'. And if there's any gas or bad air—it'll get them before it touches us."

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## Chapter XX

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**D**ESPITE their bravado, Chinook could see that the others were as uneasy about this place as Packy and the parson, who were honest enough to admit their fear of it. And Chinook had a hunch that this fear was justified. There was a cryptic something in the message of the saddle which, in itself, did not make sense. But if it was what he thought, then it had been put there as a reminder to Mugs himself, so that he would not forget, and was designed to be passed by should anyone else read it.

For Mugs Farrington, in his day, had been as desperate an outlaw as any of them, a more notorious figure than most. It was well to remember that. With advancing age and sickness, and prompted now by a desire not only to make restitution but to aid those who were kin to him, he was an entirely different sort than what he had been. But it was what he once had been—a calculating, cold-blooded desperado—that it would be well to keep in mind.

The others stopped long enough, where an old, gnarled pine tree grew, to get several pieces of pitch, which could be used as torches. Then they picked their way down into the Pit and across it, avoiding the bubbling, sulphurous mud pots, the fissures where steam and smoke spurted at more or less regular intervals. Presently the cave, looking like a tunnel mouth, was before them.

It seemed to lead straight back, into the cliff-side, a dark, grimly forbidding place. Vivian's step was firm, as she walked beside Chinook, but her heart felt like a lump of lead. How far could they walk, back

in there—driven ahead like cattle to the slaughter? And what hope was there, in any case?

But with guns behind them to emphasize the demands that they go ahead, and the five coming in a close-packed bunch, a rope's-length behind, there was nothing else to do. They stepped inside, the floor a rocky but rather slimy mess underfoot, due to a trickle of water from somewhere inside. The dark closed around them, and there was a breathless stillness to the air. The torches, in the hands of the five, gave scant illumination up here. Then Chinook's voice reached her ears, in a tense whisper.

"Hold your breath!"

Vivian obeyed, wondering what good that could do. They couldn't do it for long. They walked ahead another dozen paces, then Chinook halted. Lefty's voice came from behind them, nervous, half-expectant.

"What's the idea? You found anything?"

"I'm not aiming to walk too fast," Chinook said. "In fact, I—I think the air is getting worse—*tumble down*," he hissed at Vivian, then seemed to stagger, to collapse in a heap.

Though not understanding what he had in mind, she obeyed, becoming conscious of a current of cold air which seemed to blow across them here. There was a growl of anger from behind them, a curse, followed by a confused scrambling noise, then silence. Vivian crouched lower, not knowing what to expect.

But the silence continued unbroken. A breathless hush which stretched and grew. Then she felt Chinook's hands touch her own, his fingers questing.

"I think I can get your hands untied," he said coolly. "Take it easy. We're all right for the present."

Though not understanding, she obeyed, and presently he had the knot loose, then she freed him in turn. Still nothing had happened from those behind—no jerk on the ropes, no one coming to investigate. Even the torches had gone out.

"Stay here," Chinook ordered. "And crouch low!"

He was moving back, then, toward where the others ought to be. Vivian could see his dim form in the tunnel, outlined against the daylight at the cavern mouth. Now she saw huddled figures lying there, where he stooped above them. A moment later he was back.

"It's all right," he said. "You can go out. But remember to hold your breath till you're outside."

"But what is it?" Vivian gasped. "And what—what's happened to them?"

"Bad air," Chinook explained. "Just like they were afraid of. I think it's some sort of a gas that comes up from a fissure. There was something in the code that warned me. It said 'thirty,' just the one word, at the cave. That could mean almost anything. Sometimes thirty means the end, the finish. But I had a hunch that it meant bad air for maybe thirty feet inside. It was a risk we had to take, and it worked out. They seem to be in a bunch back there, all unconscious. Don't fall over them."

"Are—are you going to leave them there?" Vivian asked.

"I'll drag them out after a little. They'd ought to be all right for a while longer, and that's more than they'd do for us."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Look around back in here a little more, while I'm here. But you get back to the open air. I'll feel better then."

"But I—I don't want to go," Vivian protested. "I—I'm afraid. Do you think the treasure's back in here?"

"Don't know," Chinook confessed. "Though somehow I doubt it. I think this was a trap, for anybody that happened to find the secret of the saddle. I won't be long."

Reluctantly, even with that promise, Vivian did as he asked. Chinook stood to watch until her form was outlined at the cavern mouth. She at least would be all right, out in the open air, and if anything did go wrong, she could come in and maybe find him. Though nothing should go wrong, now.

But he felt safer, with her out in good air. Holding his own breath again, Chinook moved on, into the blackness ahead, feeling his way cautiously, step by step. It took only a few steps to reach a blank wall. This was the end of the cavern.

He had brought back one of the torches, and now he got this lit again. The fact that it burned was proof that the air was good, back in here, and he breathed easily again. But the murky glow of the torch failed to reveal anything which looked like treasure, or its hiding-place. The conviction was growing in his mind that there was no treasure here. Rather, that this was a clever death-trap, designed to trap anyone who might stumble on to the secret of the saddle, and prevent them from ever finding the real hiding place of the High Pockets gold.

The torch was about burnt out now. He turned, hurried back toward the cavern mouth, remembering to hold his breath again. He reached the spot where he had found a dark huddle of unconscious men, clutched the collar of one and dragged him on out to the light again. Breathless and

dizzy, he leaned there for a few moments, drawing in great gulps of good air again, then he started at a voice, almost at his elbow.

"Chinook! Golly Moses, am I glad to see yuh!"

"Mugs!" he exclaimed incredulously, and turned.

The old convict was hurrying toward him, an anxious light in his face. But in that first glance, Chinook could tell that he was in far better shape than when he had last seen him, at the ranch house some days before.

"Yeah, it's me," Mugs agreed. "I got to feelin' better—told yuh that some days I was poorly, and some I was fine. Soon's I got better, I started out to find you again, and picked up yore trail. Saw that there was a lot of you, and all headin' for this devil's country. That scart me, plenty."

He glanced around, out of breath, looked down at the limp figure of Lefty, whom Chinook had dragged out.

"Got him, didn't it?" he nodded. "I was scart it'd get you. You figgered that saddle code out?"

"Yes. You remember about it now, do you?"

Mugs nodded.

"Come back to me when I saw it was headin' in here, and thought about this place again. This was just a blind. The air's bad, for the first thirty feet or so inside. Pretty good after that—some freakish sort of an air current. But I aimed to have the spendin' of that gold myself, when I hid it. After I'd fixed it up and was workin' on that cinch, I remembered this place, and it seemed like a smart notion at the time to send anybody that was smart enough to figger it out, to die here. Right clever joke, the way I figgered it then."

"And the gold isn't here?"

"The gold's in Hangtown. I remember it all now, clear. I can find it when we get there."

"I'd better drag those other fellows out," Chinook said grimly. "I suppose they'll come to, if they aren't in there too long?"

"Yeah, guess they will. Be weak and sick two-three days, but they'll recover. Which is better'n what they deserve."

Chinook turned, plunged back, found another limp form, and half-dragged, half-carried the man to the open air. This was Packy. He returned again with one of the other men, then searched, puzzled. He had carried out only three, but the cavern was empty.

Sick and reeling again, Chinook came back to the open air. It was true. Hobe and the parson were not in there, nor were they out here, and—the thought struck him suddenly—where was Vivian? For the mo-

ment, in the surprise of seeing Mugs again and the work of rescuing the three, he had forgotten her.

A quick look around failed to show any sign of her, nor did she answer when he called. Then, sobering a little, he looked around, and the answer came to him.

Here were footprints—Vivian's and those of two others. Leading back, out of this hundred acres of hell. Mugs was studying the sign as well, and now he shook his head.

"Looks like they'd been clever enough to duck back outside 'fore they was overcome," he nodded. "When they saw what was happenin' to the others. Then they grabbed Vivian and skedaddled for other parts. Either figgered their fellers in crime was dead, or didn't care."

That was it, beyond much doubt. Hobe was clever. Probably he had sensed that this was just a booby trap, and that the gold would be in Hangtown. With the saddle, and with the parson to help him read it, he had made the most of the chance to head for Hangtown.

Assured that the three unconscious men would ultimately recover of their own accord, they hurried out again, to where the world looked normal. As Chinook had expected, the horses were gone, but Mugs' horse was where he had left it, and Chinook could hike beside him for the remaining distance to Ghost Ranch and Hangtown. He had guns again, which he had taken from the unconscious outlaws, and at Hangtown it would be showdown—showdown not only with such small fry as Hobe, but with Rialto himself.

Mugs was inclined to be garrulous today. Partly, it was the excitement of getting back to old scenes, of nearing the end of the trail which had been his goal now for a quarter of a century. And it was due in part to his feeling so much better than he had felt a few days before.

"We'll work things out, Chinook," he said. "Only thing I'm worried about is the ghosts."

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?" Chinook asked absently. His mind was on Vivian. If he'd only gone with her—

"Well, yuh can't get away from them voices," Mugs protested. "Back 'fore I left the pen, they told me again that I had tuh get that gold and turn it over to 'em. Said you'd help me, but I didn't dast fail to do it."

Chinook looked up, sharply. So the "voices" had known all about it, that he was going to help Mugs, despite his ruse at the prison? In view of what had happened since then, that information was not surprising. Such a statement might have been guesswork on the part of that ghostly directing voice, or, what was more probable, Mugs had been questioned

by it, and had innocently told what he knew. It would be easy enough for someone in the prison, a guard or trusty, to manage the voice.

The mountains were growing higher now. It was as though they were the first men ever to set foot here, though this, Chinook knew, was an illusion. Once, some three decades before, Hangtown had been a busy place indeed, these tree-grown trails had been well-beaten roads.

The old trail led them higher, into a cloud bank which was like fog, then above it into the sun again, though up here it seemed to have lost its heat. Finally they topped a high, barren ridge, and paused. Here a chill wind swept, which made Chinook draw his coat closer about him, and set the old convict to coughing. Down below them again was the sea of undulating gray clouds, spread out like an uneasy sea. Through this tumbling wall, wild mountain peaks thrust up raggedly here and there.

Mugs' faded eyes brightened, he straightened a little in the saddle and pointed to a notch in the hills, ahead and below.

"Hangtown!" he said..

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## Chapter XXI

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THAT single glimpse of it, through the clouds now closing together again after a brief rift, was unprepossessing. High, almost precipitous walls crowded the old mining camp on either side, the ruinous buildings were gray and gloomy as the fog. In silence they followed the winding, frequently steep trail down to it, and Chinook noted that this trail had been traveled recently. But whether by Hobe, the parson and Vivian, or by Rialto and others of his men there was no way of knowing.

His heart was thudding with a painful excitement. Here at last, high in the mountains of Ghost Ranch, was the goal that he and Rialto alike had sought for a long while now. And what would they find here, at trail's end? That was the question. One advantage lay with Rialto, in that he had had time to get here first, to make his plans, whatever turn they might take. And if Hobe turned the saddle over to him, it might still disclose the secret to him, though it had seemed to Chinook to end

in a blind trail, the story in the cinch all told, there at the cavern of the devils.

They came suddenly upon it again, just below the ceiling of fog. And, outwardly at least, it was as much a ghost town today as it had ever been.

Somehow Hangtown had survived the years. Buildings leaned at crazy angles, boards had been warped and twisted away from boarded-up windows, pine trees grew in the middle of the streets and sprouted from tumble-down piles that had been stores or houses, yet here and there one still stood staunchly. It was still possible to make out a few ancient, weathered signs—Club Saloon, Hangtown Hardware, Mortimer's Paris Restaurant.

Chinook eyed this place with interest. Mortimer's, in its day, had been a place whose reputation had spread throughout the West and half-way around the world legendary tales were told of it.

It had been famous not alone for good cooking, but for deep plush chairs, imported chefs and waiters, rare liquors, a false sense of ease in a tough camp, but also for its shockingly high prices and rigid code. Where neighboring restaurants charged six bits a meal, Mortimer's doubled the ante, or, more frequently, trebled it. A man could eat, or drink, or gamble, in Mortimer's—but Mortimer himself, a bronze bearded giant of a man who wore a cutaway and a top hat, was always on hand to see that there was no rough stuff, no fighting, in his place. Men could step outside to the street if they wanted to kill each other.

Now a coyote slunk out like a gray ghost through the sagging, half-opened door of Mortimer's, and Chinook, remembering the tales of this place which he had heard, shook his head.

"Seems to be a ghost-town, all right, Mugs."

Mugs was staring about, old memories crowding close to the surface. Since he lived mostly in the past anyway, this was all real to him, a leaf out of yesterday's book. He nodded.

"Yeah. I dropped seven hundred dollars in Mortimer's, one evenin'. Money that didn't belong to me. I was foreman of one of the mines, right then. Well, I had to pay that back two days later, or have a shoot-out with the boss. I figured that I was pretty tough, but I knew he was tougher. So I stuck a gun against a man's neck, going home that night, and took a thousand dollars away from him. That was my first job, an' it was so easy, I thought I'd found an easy road to gettin' rich. I didn't know, then, about all the years that I'd be rottin' behind steel bars."

Chinook had been wondering what course to follow, when he got

here. Whether to go along with Mugs, in the open, and play his hand as he found it, or to try and keep out of sight. But Rialto would know that he was heading this way, and he must have spies about. Likewise, it had always been Chinook's way to play a hand when he got it.

It was late afternoon now, and it would be dark in another hour. And at this altitude it was cold, even though it was summer in the lowlands. There was still no visible sign of anyone else, or that any but ghosts had been here for years.

"Guess we'd better stable yore horse and find us a camp for the night," Chinook suggested. "We can let the job of finding the gold go, till tomorrow."

Mugs nodded.

"Yeah. Anyway, I'm too tired to try findin' it today. And—" he passed a hand wearily across his eyes, grinned sheepishly. "Danged if I quite remember things, now. Had it all, this morning, clear as a bell. Mebby I'll remember better tomorrow. I—"

He stopped, blinking. Chinook followed his gaze, and felt his skin tighten. It was an ordinary-enough thing which he saw—any place or any time save here. A wisp of smoke, rising from an old stove pipe which, red with rust, poked its dirty snout through a roof. Smoke which merged, almost at once, with the lowering cloud-bank above them.

Smoke! That could only mean that others were here, and not too careful to keep it hidden. Though this place had such an air of desolation, of being long abandoned by man, that it might almost have been the smoke from ghost fires. Mugs was staring, sucking his breath in sharply—and not at the smoke. Chinook followed his gaze again.

Across the street from where the smoke arose, a man was standing—back to the old building, eyeing them sardonically. A tall man, with head twisted curiously to one side as he watched. A man dressed in the garb of a century ago, his face covered with a ragged growth of whiskers.

It didn't require Mugs' half-whispered ejaculation to name him, for once, in leafing through an old pile of reward dodgers, while he had served as deputy sheriff, Chinook had come across the picture and description of this man, known and wanted in a dozen states and territories—Slanthead Ellison!

But Slanthead had been dead now for long years. Yet, knowing that, and ready for any sort of trickery, Chinook felt his flesh creep a little at the angle of that wry neck. Then he strode forward. If they wanted to play a game, he'd play it along with them. Of only one thing was

he certain, this man who had the role of a ghost in a ghostly town, was one whom he had not encountered before, among the members of the gang.

Chinook had covered half the distance when the figure seemed to move, to dissolve like a wisp of the fog. Chinook blinked, halted uneasily.

This was a game, he was convinced, a game that was being played, partly to play on the superstitions of Mugs, and with the fine hand of Rialto somewhere in the background, pulling the strings. The man was here—he had to be—

For right here was where the man—or ghost—had been standing, only a moment before. He and Mugs had both seen him. But he wasn't here now—yet he could only have vanished by stepping back through the solid board wall of the old building.

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## Chapter XXII

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A CHILL prickling sensation rippled like an icicle being drawn along up Chinook's spine, the short hairs at the base of his scalp seemed to rise like the hackles of a dog. He stood still for a moment, fighting down a desire to rush headlong across to where that smoke was still rising into the fog, to find out what this was all about. But that would be playing the other fellow's game. This was no time to lose his head—not if he wanted to keep it literally!

For he knew, now, that he had done exactly what they had planned for him to do, that he had walked, along with the old convict, into a trap baited and set. He'd known it would be that way, but he had been willing to do it, since that seemed the only way to get Vivian out of it. But unless they watched their step now, none of them would escape.

"That was Slanthead, all right," Mugs husked, and his voice was a little uncertain. "I'd heard tell that he was hanged a second time, and that they killed him that try. But he looked just about like he did the last time I ever saw him."

"Well, our ghostly friends seem to have a fire, so let's go in and get warm," Chinook suggested, trying to make his voice sound casual.

"After all, we're here because they wanted you to come—so they shouldn't be unfriendly."

That didn't sound so reassuring as he could have wished, even in his own ears. But they had to play it that way for a while. Leaving Mugs' horse ground-hitched, for grass grew here in the middle of the old street, they crossed to the cabin, pushed open a door which screeched and dragged protestingly, and were inside whence came the smoke.

Instantly a wave of warmth hit them, welcome after the damp rawness of the outer air. The old, rusty stove in a corner of the room was burning with a real fire inside it, no doubt of that, and on a table were dishes, recently-used tin dishes. But no one was about—no one that was visible, at least.

Chinook tried to think clearly. He had a pretty good idea of just what Rialto would be trying to do, but it was possible that they had appeared so suddenly and unexpectedly out of the fog as to catch the others by surprise, and perhaps to disconcert them. If Hobe and the parson had arrived to declare that Chinook was dead, that could help to explain it.

Yet there was Slanthead, and the way he had simply vanished into thin air, or through a board wall, before their eyes. That was something hard to figure.

"I'll bring in the grub, off your horse, Mugs," Chinook said. "You cook us up some supper while I find a stable. There's a fire here, and dishes. So we might as well make use of them."

Mugs nodded in silence. Chinook could see that he was uneasy, and he couldn't much blame him for that. Though, in a way, this too was what Mugs had expected. He had been worked on for a long time by the voices, and had expected to find the ghosts of dead men, here at Hangtown. Yet even with that belief in mind, finding it so was not too pleasant a reality.

There was an old livery stable, still in fair shape, just down the street. The door stood half open, the shadowy interior was gloomy, but a coyote scuttled away as he peered in, proof that no one had been in there recently. Chinook led the horse in to an old stall which still contained hay.

If these present-day habitants of Hangtown, ghostly or otherwise, wanted to spirit the cayuse away, they would have an easy job of it. But since they were playing a new game now, he'd just go ahead and play it with them and see where it led. There was no sign of Vivian, none of her brother. But likely they'd be turning up at what Rialto

judged the proper time and place. This had settled into a game of wits, Chinook figured, between the two of them. Rialto had force on his side, but force would not unlock the secret which he desired.

And he must know, by now, that Chinook had figured out that code and read it, in the saddle cinch. Whether Rialto could do as well, or not, remained to be seen. And—Chinook grinned thinly—if it left him as puzzled as it did Chinook, would he figure that Chinook knew the rest of the secret, or not? That was one of the cards in the deck, but whether it was trump or joker, time only could tell.

Instead of returning directly to the cabin, Chinook, keeping to the deeper shadows which now lined the old street, moved unobtrusively to the spot where Slanthead had been standing, the place where he had disappeared so abruptly.

A quick examination showed him nothing. A second one, in more detail, began to give him ideas. This was a board wall, all right, and it looked solid enough. But these boards ran up and down, not crosswise. A door could be built in them and hidden without much trouble.

A moment later he was sure that that was it. The door had been cleverly constructed, and only a broken line of ancient, dried dust on the cracks of the boards themselves revealed, in faint tracery, the outline of it. The hinges, of course, were on the inside. That door had been opened just enough for Slanthead to slip through, and in the gathering dusk and drifting mist, the illusion had been a good one, especially from where they had viewed it.

Chinook did not bother to investigate farther. He had found out what he wanted to know. He returned to the house, to find Mugs slicing bacon into a pan and coffee bubbling on the old stove. The pot was the one that the others had used and left there. The aroma of it was heartening. Chinook helped him a little, then turned.

Not that he had heard anything. There had been no sound, but he had known that someone had appeared in the doorway behind them. The feeling was as strong as if he had seen and heard. Nor was he mistaken.

A man stood there—one who looked to be about thirty-five or so, with a plentiful thatch of fiery red hair and a heavy etching of red freckles. He was dressed like a gold miner, with the stains of mud and of sluice-boxes on boots and old overalls. He wore an old-fashioned, single-shot pistol at his hip, and again, Chinook didn't need the word from Mugs to know him.

He'd seen this man's picture in that pile of ancient reward dodgers, too—and had known that he had been shot to death in a running

gunfight with law men, nearly a quarter of a century before. This man was Mike Hogan, or his ghost—or a spitting representation of Mike Hogan. Red Mike, who had been the leader of the High Pockets gang.

"Mike Hogan!" Mugs said, simply. It was evident to Chinook that there were no doubts in Mugs' mind. But then, as he knew, few people could spend a decade in stir and not become a little queer, and Mugs, with brief exceptions, had spent more than twice that period behind bars.

Hogan nodded, advancing into the room.

"Yeah," he agreed. "It's mesilf, all right. And phwhat the divil are yez doing in me cabin, Mugs Farrington, and makin' yoresilf at home the same as if ut belonged to ye?"

"And why shouldn't we make ourselves at home?" Mugs challenged, with a flash of his old-time spirit. "Didn't you tell me I had to come back here and find that gold? *I* still have to eat, and rest—whether you do those things or not. Besides, I'd forgot about this havin' been your cabin."

"Sure and it was always me cabin, as ye know very well," Hogan nodded. "But since ye're here, go ahead and eat. Ye'll get past the need for that, too—one av these days. And sure it's about time ye came back for that job av divvyin' up the gold. One year was what we agreed on, and this is thirteen months!"

"More than that," Mugs said.

"How the divil should it be more than that? The thirteenth av May we agreed upon, and tomorrow is the thirteenth—av June."

That, Chinook calculated swiftly, might be around the real date, though he had lost track.

But nothing else, to his jaundiced ear, was right here. Even Red Mike's accent didn't ring true more than half of the time. These fellows, as he had been sure of from the first, were putting on an act, for Mugs' benefit, hoping to get hold of the loot by playing on his fears and superstitions. And Mugs, after that long build-up back at the prison, was apparently convinced, and in a mood to accept the unbelievable as just one more thing which he couldn't quite understand, and which he was too tired to try and figure out. But the act which they were putting on creaked rather badly in places.

Red Hogan swung now to scowl at Chinook.

"And who the divil is your fr'ind, Mugs?" he demanded. "And why did yez bring him here? Didn't we tell ye that it was to come here and alone ye should do?"

"If you're Mike Hogan, I'd like to shake your hand," Chinook cut

in with deceptive guile. "I've always heard it said that you were a great man, Red. With more notches on your gun than any other man who ever came to Hangtown."

"As to that, 'tis no more than the sober truth," Hogan admitted readily. "Sure and Oi've always known how to use a gun. But as to shakin' hands—no!"

He stepped back, as Chinook stepped forward. Chinook took another swift stride, hand outstretched—and closed it on empty space. He'd maneuvered Hogan, or his ghost, to a point where only the solid wall was behind him—as had been the case with Slanthead. And, like him, Hogan had vanished as suddenly.

But they were rather overdoing this ghostly vanishing business, Chinook reflected. Naturally, Hogan hadn't wanted him to get his hands on him. That would be hard on the ghost theory, and for the present they were anxious to use it on Mugs; likewise, they probably didn't want him to get his hands on them. But so far as Chinook was concerned, they had already ruined their act.

The old coal-oil lantern which had been set on a table, had gone out as Chinook reached for Hogan, plunging the room into sudden half-darkness. Chinook brought up against the wall, backed warily. He lit the lantern again, and was not surprised to find the room empty, save for Mugs and himself.

"It's no use, Chinook," Mugs commented, seeing the look on his face. "They seem real enough—but just the same, they're the ghosts of men long dead. Didn't I hear their voices, back there at the pen, explainin' the things to me, over and over ag'in? And some things yuh can't understand. The best we can do, for the present, I guess, is as they say, and let it go at that."

"Maybe you're right," Chinook agreed, wondering if the old convict's resolution to save the loot and return it, so that his niece and nephew could have the reward, was weakening. But there was no need to argue with a man more than half-cracked on a subject. It was plain to him that Rialto had gone to some trouble to prepare this stage-setting in advance, with men fixed up to play these parts.

With the lantern re-lit, he could see that these boards also ran vertically, and while the line of the hidden door was not apparent in the dim light, he knew that it was there.

Which meant that some confederate had opened the door a crack from within, had been watching, ready for the disappearing trick. He had puffed out the lantern, Hogan had ducked through and out of sight, while the door was quickly shut again.

It was a cat and mouse game, with enemies all around them. How long would they use this method, before resorting to more direct action again? And where was Vivian? But the best thing was to play this game on their own part, while they could. Chinook shrugged.

"Let's eat," he said.

"That's one thing we can do," Mugs agreed. "And I've always noticed this, Chinook—if yuh do as ghosts tell you, they won't hurt you. It's only when yuh try to go and buck them that you get intuh trouble."

Chinook smiled to himself. How much of this Mugs believed, and how much he was putting on for the benefit of unseen eyes, he wasn't quite sure, but he had discovered already that Mugs was no fool. If he really did believe in ghosts, it didn't matter—unless his gold was ghostly as well. And somehow, Chinook didn't believe that.

One thing was clear. They were pretty much in the power of Rialto's gang, but so long as the others preferred to try this angle, it was in their favor. He'd play along too, for a while, and keep his eyes open. He got to his feet again presently, stretching his arms and yawning.

"I guess I'll go have another look at yore horse, Mugs, then turn in," he said.

"Suits me," Mugs agreed. "I'm that tired, I could sleep if there was a Indian pow-wow going on."

It was easy to see that the old convict was close to exhaustion. Which precluded any thought of one of them keeping watch while the other slept—though, believing as he did, Mugs might confuse men and ghosts in any case, which would make him of doubtful value as a guard.

Chinook was tired, too, but concern for Vivian and her brother buoyed him up. He found Mugs' horse just as he had left it, and it gave a lonesome whinny at sight of him. He paused to rub its nose and pull its ears for a minute, heard a rat scuttle away in the darkness, and then moved stealthily across to an old window, which had been boarded up when the camp was deserted.

The boards had warped and fallen away with the years, however, and the old glass was gone as well. He swung a leg across the sill, was out in the deep shadows of the long-deserted street.

For the next quarter of an hour he prowled, hand on the butt of his revolver, but there was nothing to see or hear. For tonight at any rate, they were keeping it according to the tradition. And he couldn't go poking into every old, fallen to ruins house in Hangtown. To do so in the dark, blundering along, would be inviting disaster rather than

being helpful in any case. But there was something funny here, something that didn't quite fit in the pattern, and it bothered him.

Presently he returned to the cabin which Red Mike claimed as his own. There was no sign of Red Mike or his ghost, and Mugs was ready for bed. He had elected to sleep by the fire, rolled in a blanket.

Chinook eyed the wall beyond for a moment. Tall and dark, his hair in disorder, he caught a glimpse of himself in an old mirror which Mugs had propped against the wall, and saw that he looked more like an Indian than ever. Behind the little hand-mirror was that part of the wall where Mike Hogan had done his vanishing act. Chinook would have liked to nail a board along it, but to do so, he figured, would probably upset Mugs, and it would do little good in any case. There was no telling how many props and secret doors they had fixed around here, in constructing this elaborate stage-setting, to try and get hold of a fortune.

Rialto had ordered that done, of course, when it had become apparent that Mugs might be freed from prison, and the whole scheme had suggested itself to him. Much had happened since that initial idea, however. Mugs had written that letter, which had turned out, through Rialto's own efforts, to be a dud. And he, Chinook, had been dragged into the middle of things. No telling how much trouble Rialto would spend with this old ghost idea now.

Whatever the ultimate decision, he was in their way. But so long as they tried this plan, playing a waiting game, he was probably safe enough for the present. With the light of the lantern shining through the open door between, Chinook went into the next room.

It was musty with the air of a long-deserted place, save for the ever stronger odor of rats and mice which used it for a playground through the years. A nest of fuzzy stuff in one corner showed where rats had really moved in. Dust hung heavy, in contrast to the outer room of the cabin—dust untouched by any sign of recent human occupancy. Chinook smiled grimly. It was funny that ghosts would bother to sweep the dust from the rooms they did choose to occupy!

There was, he saw, still another door, leading to an extra room beyond—and that room could likewise be reached, by the secret door through which Red Mike, or his ghost, had vanished.

But this door was a stout one, and locked. Chinook eyed it. Then, taking a stick of stove wood, he braced it against the far door. Then he rolled a blanket, did a little work above it, and had a passable-looking dummy, there in the dark. Maybe he wouldn't need it, but it was just as well to be prepared.

That done, he blew out the lantern, took the remaining blanket, and, going to the deep shadows on the far side of the room, wrapped himself against the chill of this high mountain air, and crouched down to wait.

Probably he was being a fool, he reflected. He needed sleep—and if these ghosts who packed guns wanted to kill him, it shouldn't be too difficult a chore, with the odds as they were, to tackle outright. But this was a hunch, and he believed in hunches.

Time dragged. Outside, a coyote howled in the street, the sound doubly wild and lonely tonight. From the next room came the heavy breathing of Mugs. Moonlight filtered in at an old, boarded-up window, where a board had been ripped away. That must mean that it was clearing outside, the fog lifting.

Chinook started, aware that he had dozed. He crouched, noting that the darkness was deeper, the moonlight gone again. Mugs' breathing still sounded faintly. Something that might have been a footstep echoed somewhere, followed by silence.

Gripping his gun, Chinook moved warily into the middle of the room. Then he stood staring down, his jaws tightening a little. That dummy still looked realistic enough, like a sleeping man—or a dead man.

As he would surely have been, if he had remained in that blanket. For, buried to the hilt in the dummy, Chinook could see a long, evil-bladed bowie knife, where some midnight visitant had plunged it in.

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## Chapter XXIII

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CHINOOK reached over and drew the knife out, running his thumb along the keen edge of it, feeling the prick of the needle-like point to which the tip of the blade had been ground. It was an excellent piece of steel, and very substantial—so much so that the shadow of a grin touched his lips as he fondled it. There was nothing ghostly about this, and so far as he had ever heard, no ghost had to have recourse to such prosaic weapons in his nocturnal prowlings.

Likewise, he had seen this knife before. Hobe had carried it in a sheath. Which was proof that Hobe and the parson had headed this

way, all right. But there was still something wrong somewhere in the picture.

But the ghost was substantial in other ways than the use of a knife. For, in the dust of the floor of this room, there were now two sets of boot-marks—those made by Chinook himself when he had entered the room, and others made by the knife-wielder.

Since it was pretty plain that Hobe must consider that he had done a good job, and would consider him as dead now, he could sleep undisturbed for the rest of the night in comparative safety. Chinook returned to his interrupted nap, after picking up the extra blanket.

Morning found him refreshed and unmolested, as he had counted on. He came into the next room to find Mugs still sleeping, having been so tired that nothing had disturbed him during the night. It was rather amazing, the toughness and vitality of the old convict. He had been a sick man, only a few days before, and was still far from well.

But his was an up and down sort of illness, just as he had assured Chinook. One day he might be flat on his back, only to rally for several days and be able to accomplish remarkable feats. The excitement of freedom, of accomplishing a mission which had engaged his mind for a long time, had acted that way the day before.

And Mugs was in good shape when he presently sat up and looked around. A moment later he was reaching for his boots, grinning, the vagueness which sometimes gripped him, all gone.

"Coffee an' flapjacks!" he exclaimed. "And I've got me an appetite for the first time since I can remember. Feel like a new man this mornin', Chinook—aside from bein' a little stiff an' sore."

"You've a right to feel that way," Chinook assured him. "Did you sleep well?"

"Best I have in years. I was a log from the time I hit the blankets. How about you?"

"Not bad at all," Chinook said, hiding a grin. "I—"

He paused, for from outside sounded the unghostlike clomp of booted feet, then the door was pushed open and three men entered, stopping abruptly at sight of Chinook forking pancakes into his mouth. One of these was Red Mike Hogan, the second was Slanthead Ellison, both of whom they had seen the day before. The third, Chinook was pretty sure, was supposed to be Hardluck Trant. Apparently all of the ghosts who now made Hangtown their rendezvous had once occupied a prominent place in the rogue's gallery.

There was something familiar about two of them. Then he had it.

Hardluck Trant was Hobe. It was a good disguise, but Chinook knew him now. And Slanthead Ellison was the parson.

Hardluck, in this guise, was a big man of indefinite age. He might have been thirty or forty-five or sixty, to look at him. For his face was an unnatural, pasty color—almost like that of a woman who had applied powder and lip-stick too heavily and not too expertly. Yet, from what Chinook had heard of the man, this make-up was realistic, artistically done.

He was dressed in old, faded and torn overalls and sweater, a shapeless hat two sizes too big for him, boots badly run-down at heel. Those boots, Chinook decided, would fit nicely into the imprints in the dust in the other room, where his would-be killer had crept during the night. It had been Hobe's knife, but not his hand which wielded it.

The surprise in their faces at sight of him lasted only a moment, but it was long enough. Then, a little grimmer, more warily, they came on into the room and Red Mike kicked the door shut behind them.

"So ye're still enjoyin' me hospitality, is ut?" he asked. "Well, Oi hope ye're soon willin' to pay for it be showin' us where ye cached our goold, Mugs me b'y."

"Sure I'll show you," Mugs agreed, with disarming frankness. "What do you think I came back here for? It's not that I'm in shape to enjoy the trip, and I'll never have the spendin' of any of that gold."

"Share an' share alike, that was our agreement, and we stick to it," Red Mike interjected.

Mugs raised his head quickly. When it came to events of the dead past, that was what he lived in—and his mind today was keen and alert.

"The devil it was," he protested. "There was six of us, and you and I each get twenty per cent, Mike. And the others were to have fifteen per cent apiece. Don't you remember?"

For an instant, Red Mike Hogan looked confused, and in that moment, Chinook knew him. The man was fixed up rather well to play the part of a man long dead, and the scar on his face had been cleverly hidden. They were all playing a part which they hoped would convince Mugs and win for them the wealth that other men had died for, in a vain effort to possess.

But Red Mike belonged in the rogue's gallery of the present day as much as the real Red Mike had belonged there in his own day. Chinook had seen him before, and now he knew where. He was the

trusty, back in the penitentiary, and a lot of things that had been mysterious before were becoming clear now.

No flicker of emotion on Chinook's face betrayed that he knew any of the three of them, however, and after a moment, Hogan recovered from his own surprise.

"Ah, er—why sure, Oi remember, Mugs," he agreed. "But the way Oi figgered it was this. Yez don't seem to want your twinty per cint, and so Oi thought I'd just divvy fair with the rest av the boys. Even, all around."

"Sure, we was all in it together, equal risk; and we ought to share alike," Hardluck whined.

Mugs fixed him with an eye in which suspicion or amusement was mounting, Chinook was not quite sure which.

"Yeah, wasn't we, though?" he mocked. "You stayed back, I mind, Hardluck, clear out of danger, and held the horses, while the rest of us risked our necks. Claimed you was too sick to do anything else. You was too yellow, was what ailed you. You're a fine one to talk!"

"Never mind that," Slanthead growled. "What we want to know is where yuh hid the stuff. That's what you come here to show us, ain't it?"

"Yeah, sure," Mugs agreed. "But I forgot. I got to have a look at the saddle to remember."

They stared at him suspiciously, wondering, like Chinook, if he was pulling their leg. Chinook had deciphered the secret of the cinch, he believed, and that had led only to the cave of the devils, and that death-trap. But after a moment, they agreed.

"We'll get it for yuh, if that's what you want."

"Got to have it," Mugs insisted, and grinned wolfishly at them, a mocking light in his eyes. "But I'm going tuh finish my breakfast first, 'fore I do anything else. There ain't no tearin' hurry."

"No hurry at all," Red Mike assured him placatingly. "Take all the time yez need, Mugs me b'y."

The three sat down, suspicious and ill at ease, casting glances toward the closed door of the next room, but unwilling to venture there for a look. If the situation had not been so serious, with the whereabouts of Vivian and her brother tormenting him increasingly, Chinook would have laughed outright. He had them guessing, and badly worried. And more than that, he knew them all.

Slanthead had forgotten to hold his head as though he had a wry neck. Chinook shot a sudden question at them.

"Where's Vivian Ford?"

"You'd ought to know," Hobe growled. "You was with her—"

He stopped, glaring, aware that he had been tricked, that the disguise was no longer of any use. But Chinook was staring in turn, puzzled. For it sounded as if Hobe, caught off-guard, had told the truth. Yet he had been sure that these two, Hobe and the parson, had kidnapped her when they had fled from the cave of the devils. If they had not, what had happened? Where was she?

Heavy, sullen silence held, while Mugs finished his breakfast unhurriedly. Then they all walked outside. Hangtown, in the light of a thin sun, was little more prepossessing in appearance than it had been the evening before, with fog clammily spread across it. Slanthead hurried away, to return presently, the saddle slung over his shoulder. That it was the same saddle there could be no doubt. That rainbow-hued cinch, looking now rather the worse for wear and much inspection, was still fastened to it.

"This was what yuh wanted," he growled.

"Sure, 't was what I wanted," Mugs agreed. He sat down on the ground, cross-legged, took the saddle on his lap, and began to finger the threads of the cinch, one by one, his lips moving as he did so.

For perhaps a half hour, while the sun climbed higher, he sat in silence, the others watching him impatiently. It became clear to Chinook, watching him, that he was merely stalling for time, doing nothing at all. And finally the same fact began to dawn on the others as well.

"Come on, come on, let's get movin'." Red Mike growled impatiently. "We ain't got forever."

Mugs came to his feet, and stood, hands on hips. He was staring from one smeared, outlandish face to the other, and his mood was suddenly irascible. His lips drew back in a snarl.

"Why not?" he demanded. "What's time mean to dead men? But it's in my mind that you're all tryin' to play me for a fool—and I ain't the man to stand for that, and never was. If you're Red Mike Hogan, then I'm even crazier'n what I think I be. Yuh forget yore brogue half the time, and yuh don't talk much like Red Mike did, anyway, nor like yuh did, back at the pen. Likewise, Slanthead ain't Slanthead, nor even his ghost. No need tuh twist yore neck any more, hombre—you forgot too many times already!"

In the sudden tense silence, he swung on Hardluck—or Hobe.

"And you—yuh ain't no more Hardluck than what I am, nor half as much. Yuh sure been forgettin' yore parts. Figgered it didn't matter any more, eh?"

Chinook felt a thrill of admiration for the old outlaw. He saw now that he had been playing a part all along, that he never had been deceived by voices or any of the rest of it. Realizing that the game was played out, he was speaking his mind, regardless of consequences.

"I know damn good an' well," Mugs went on, "that you birds want that gold—which I can see now that yuh ain't got even the ghost of a right to. If you'd kept out of sight, except for them voices, yuh might have fooled bigger fools than me. But you don't look too much like my old side-kicks did, and yuh sure don't sound like them. So now I'm going to think it over for a spell. Long as yuh want that gold, yuh can treat Chinook and me nice—and mebbey get it. But if you had it, I ain't under no illusions as to how quick you'd stick a knife in both of us."

Hobe's lip curled back from his teeth in a sudden vicious snarl. All three of them had abruptly thrown off all pretense, seeing the game was up.

"You're gettin' smart all at once, for a crazy old codger stumblin' along with one foot in the grave," Hobe grated. "But don't get too smart for yore own good, Mugs. We're playin' for that gold, all right, and we're going to have it. There ain't nobody to help either of you, and the things we might do to you if we had it, and you riled us, ain't a patchin' to the things we'll do to both of you, and pronto, if you don't show it to us without no more stallin' around."

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## Chapter XXIV

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NONE OF THEM were trying for their guns, but they were ready for show-down if it came to that, and, the odds being what they were, Chinook was in no hurry to precipitate a crisis. The only encouraging thing about it was that, knowing his reputation, neither were they. But they figured that they had the upper hand now, and intended to use it.

But so long as Mugs was stalling for time, playing a game, it was up to him to help him out, though he couldn't understand quite what it was all about.

"There's one thing I'd like to know, while we're still on the subject,"

he said. "How'd you manage those voices, Mike? Back at the jail. It must have been pretty clever."

The bogus Red Mike, ex-trusty, swelled like a pouter pigeon. He had hit on the right note.

"I did put on a pretty convincin' act, I guess," he agreed, and his voice was again the voice of Red Mike Hogan. "Sure, and Oi've been the voice av a ghostly past for a long toime now. And I made yez belave it for a while, Mugs."

"Guess you more'n half-way did, for a while," Mugs nodded. "But how'd you do it?"

"It was simple enough. I'm something of a ventriloquist, among other accomplishments. I used to do an act on the stage for a while, so I knew all about make-up and that sort of thing." He glanced at his companions pridefully. "I know how to do a good job. And I had a lot of freedom of action, there at the pen."

"I can understand that part of it," Chinook agreed, still talking for time. "But to fake the voices even half-way right, so as to fool Mugs, and to know how they'd be likely to talk, about something that happened a quarter of a century before—I can't see how you did that."

"Red Mike was my uncle," Hogan explained. "He told me and another hombre about it, before he kicked off, there in the pen, a few years ago—he was in under another name, Mugs. That other hombre, as yuh've mebbly guessed, was Rialto—Burch Rialto. It was his idea, after he got out and heard about that money, and he fixed things up, had me practice the voices till I could work them pretty good, just in case."

"And here comes Rialto, now," Mugs said softly.

Hogan spun around, his face flushing angrily, then paling. Clearly, the trio had not expected Rialto to arrive here today, and had hoped to double-cross him. Evidently Mugs had sensed something of the sort, had been stalling. When thieves fall out—well, honest men at least stood a better chance then.

Rialto rode up, on a horse which looked as if it had traveled a long way in a short time. He was bearded, dirty and tired, and his mood, as could be told at a glance, was anything but pleasant. But his eyes glowed at sight of Chinook and Mugs.

"So you've got them, have you?" he demanded. "What's the idea of foolin'? *Get their guns!*"

Chinook hesitated. This might be the time to make a play, while he still had a gun. But Mugs, he knew, whatever speed and accuracy he might once have possessed, would be too slow now to count. It would

be virtually four against one, and at those odds, certain death. He submitted as guns were drawn and his own taken.

"That's better," Rialto growled, "What you been foolin' around for? I gave up that idea of playin' ghost a long spell back. No chance to work it with Chinook around."

"How'd we know that?" Hogan growled. "We thought it was what yuh wanted."

"I bet you did," Rialto sneered. "You aimed to double-cross me, but I fooled you. Where are the others?"

Knowing that Chinook and Mugs could contradict them, they told the truth—concerning what had happened at the cavern. But Chinook was puzzled that there was still no mention of Vivian. Rialto answered without a change of expression.

"So you double-crossed them, too? Just what I'd expect. But there's been too much fooling." He swung on Chinook, his face darkening.

"You've lived a lot too long," he said darkly. "And this time, I don't aim to make any more mistakes. You've just one chance to go on livin'—both of you. Turn that High Pockets gold over to us, without any more stallin'—or die. Mugs can watch you go first, if he feels that way about it."

Chinook and Mugs exchanged glances. Both of them knew the answer. Once these hombres had the gold, that sealed a death-sentence for the pair of them.

But for the present, there was only one thing which they could do—play for the breaks—for whatever Mugs had been hoping for from the beginning. Mugs' face hardened a little, then he shrugged.

"And just what do you think you'd do?" he asked.

"I'll tell you," said Rialto, and his grin was wolfish. "It's something that I'll enjoy—but quick and sure. We'll tie this hombre's arms behind his back. Then slip a noose around his feet, and tie the other end of that rope to a saddle-horn. Then one of us will ride the horse and drag him around a spell—until you get ready to talk, or have some more of the same."

Mugs' eyes were smouldering. But he knew just how ghastly a death that would be, and that he could stall no longer here.

"You're a fine pack of skunks," he growled.

"Ain't we, though?" Rialto rolled a cigarette and lit it. "You can decide right quick."

"You win," Mugs agreed. "Ill show yuh where the saddle's secret really is—and I hope that gold'll bring as much bad luck to the bunch of yuh, as it did to us who stole it in the first place."

"We'll take that risk," Rialto said shortly. "Get started."

For answer, Mugs stooped above the saddle, gave a sudden cunning twist to the saddle-horn, and part of it came loose in his hand. Inside was a yellowed paper, which Rialto snatched. But after the four had studied it a while, they gave it back in disgust.

"Mebby it means something to you," Rialto growled, "It'd better—and it'd better be good."

"I'll remember, with this," Mugs promised. "And it'll be good!"

He took the paper, studied it with frowning concentration for a while. Here, beyond question, was the saddle's secret. He looked around, came to an abrupt decision.

"It's near a mile from here," Mugs said. "Do I get to ride?"

"Sure," Rialto agreed. "Bring the horses, boys."

Half an hour later, they arrived at the spot which Mugs had designated, and which now he seemed to remember as well as if it had all happened only a few days before. It was at the far end of Hangtown's street, where an old log cabin had been built close up against the steeply rearing hill, which seemed almost to overtower it. Giant pines grew on a slightly outjutting ridge a little way up the slope, overshadowing the place, making it seem more gloomy and desolate than ever. Mugs tugged open the old door, grunting with the effort, then stared into the musty, shadowy interior.

"Rip off those boards on that back wall," he instructed curtly. "Then dig."

Hogan started forward eagerly. But Rialto stopped him.

"Sure, we'll dig," he agreed, and cast a wary eye about the room. "But don't get the notion that we're tenderfeet at this sort of game, Mugs. Not any. It's in my mind that mebby you took a few precautions when you planted this loot, the first time. Mebby you set a few booby traps to catch anybody that might come snoopin' around, tryin' to get your gold. That one at the cave wouldn't need to be the only one."

Mugs' face was expressionless. Almost too much so. Here in Hangtown he was a different man than what he had been at the penitentiary, living again the old life in a familiar environment, his mind reacting nearly as keenly as it had done in the old days. Rialto, watching him, chuckled unpleasantly.

"I might be right, eh? And your hope that bad luck would overtake us wasn't just an idle wish. Well, like I say, we're takin' a few precautions—and if anything should happen to us, something 'll sure happen to you as well."

"Let's tie them up and have them right beside us," Hobe suggested. "Then if anything goes wrong, it'll happen to them too."

Rialto shook his head.

"I'm surprised at you, Hobe. Thought you was smarter'n that. That locoed old ranny might let it work that way, just to get us. I got a better idea. Somethin' the killer told me about. Bring the cayuses."

Four saddled horses were brought. Rialto went to work. The others, including Chinook and Mugs, watched him, puzzled. But gradually his plan began to grow apparent to Chinook, and while it was a variation of what Killer Kurtch had used, it possessed a lot of the same fiendish ingenuity.

Outside, and a little way back from the door of the cabin, trees grew thickly, a growth which had sprung up since the shack had been abandoned. There was a lane six or eight feet wide between them. But beyond, and at the side, was a wide open space.

Rialto placed the horses, two and two, side by side, between the trees, so that they could not move very far apart. Then he ran ropes from their bridles, ahead to the open space, and around small trees which would serve somewhat as pulleys. The ropes led on into the cabin, where he and his companions intended to work. It took a lot of rope, but there was plenty of it on hand.

Mugs, watching, paled a little as he began to understand, and looked rather wildly around. But Hangtown was a ghost town in truth as well as in name now. There was no indication that anyone else had been close to it for years, or might be. If any help was to come, Chinook knew grimly that they had better depend on themselves.

"Now," Rialto said, almost genially. "You two hombres can sort of half-way get on them cayuses."

It was "sort of half-way" with a vengeance. Chinook was picked up first, by Hogan and the parson, and carried between the two foremost horses. His right foot was placed in the left-hand stirrup of the right horse, his left foot in the right-hand stirrup of the other cayuse, then both feet were tied fast. Next, his right hand was tied to the saddle-horn up above, the parson laboring wheezily, nervously. That done, his left hand was tied to the saddle-horn opposite.

The result of that operation was to leave him suspended in mid-air between the two horses, and tied to both saddles, hand and foot! So long as the horses stood where they were, unmoving, and unable to sidle far apart because of the close-growing trees on either side, he was uncomfortable, but safe enough.

But if a pull should come at the end of one of those lead-ropes,

which ran out into the open space ahead and then in to the cabin, where the quartette would be digging—then the horses would trot forward, separate as the open ground ahead gave them a chance to do so, and literally tear him in two as they did so.

It was a scheme which would have delighted Killer Kurtch. If this was Ghost Ranch indeed, then his ghost must be watching and gibbering approval!

Mugs was being tied in the same manner to the other two cayuses just behind those of Chinook. Rialto watched, then nodded with satisfaction.

"You've been a pain in the neck to me for a long time, Chinook," he said. "Even tryin' to get my girl away from me! Mebby it'll interest yuh to know that, after getting out of that cave the other day, she had a glimpse of her brother, a prisoner, off across the way, and started out to try and rescue him—which she didn't do! Just the contrary! They'll be comin' along here before too long, likely, with some of the other boys. You've been stallin', hopin' for rescue from them, ain't yuh, Mugs? Well, that's another hope that won't work out.

"I'm still aimin' to have her—and that gold. I'm tellin' yuh this just to make it pleasant for you. Now well go ahead an' dig. If anything happens, we can jerk those ropes—and something a damn sight worse will happen to you two! If nothin' happens, and we find the gold all right, then the horses 'll stand, and yuh can mebby be present at my weddin'! But if there's any booby traps set, you'd better tell us, plenty of time beforehand!"

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## Chapter XXV

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THE OLD convict's face had gone, if anything, paler than before, and Chinook knew that his own face must be bloodless. This was about as potent a persuader as could be imagined, but as the others picked up tools now, and Mugs made as if to speak, Chinook caught his eye and winked at him, and Mugs subsided.

He understood what Mugs had planned, what he had hoped for. Rescue by Vivian and George Ford, with perhaps others with them. Mugs hadn't said anything, not liking to raise his hopes when he

wasn't certain. But he had been playing that hunch for all it was worth.

Now, it seemed, that had failed. Not only would there be no help forthcoming, but it was George and Vivian who stood in need of help. If Rialto won here, and got his hands on the gold which he had sought for so long, he would be doubly dangerous. It was now or never.

The four of them were inside the cabin now, starting to rip away the boards at the side built up close against the hill, attacking the dirt with picks and shovels. Suddenly, Hogan gave a yell, which was followed by an excited chorus. Then they all came back out into the open, carrying something between them—a bar of gold bullion, by the look of it, which weighed half a hundred pounds or so. One of the bars, beyond much doubt, from the old High Pockets mine.

Gold fever had the quartette in its grip now. Completely forgetful of those others of their owlhoot confederacy who had died in an attempt to come by this treasure, they scraped at the bar with knives, hefted it, then went wild with elation as they proved that it was gold, real gold, and nothing else. Rialto darted toward them, brandishing his fists wildly.

"You thought you'd cheat me, didn't you?" he yelled. "But I knew I'd win! I always do! And this is only the start!"

He turned back, and the others dropped the bar as abruptly then crowded back inside the cabin, feverishly eager.

"There'll be a lot of other bars like it," Hobe yelled. "Let's get them next!"

They were too excited now to pay much attention to their captives. Even Rialto, when he had approached them, had hardly looked at them, his eyes red with lust for gold. Mugs' voice came dourly to Chinook's ears.

"Less we stop them, it won't be long now 'fore they run into a booby trap, all right," he said. "I sure aimed to take plenty of precautions, when I hid that stuff in the first place—I knew the kind of hombres I was dealin' with, and besides, I aimed to sort of double-cross the rest of the gang. And while that bunch sure deserve to walk into it—and with that bar of bullion for bait to the booby trap, nothin' 'll stop 'em—why, I ain't anxious to have you killed this way, Chinook. You been playin' square with me and the Fords. So I guess I better warn 'em—for the way they've got us tied, it'll take us when it gets them."

"Wait," Chinook gasped. "I think I can mebbly handle the situation—"

He had been struggling in silence, but desperately, for the past twenty minutes, while the attention of the owlhooters was distracted. He had guessed that time would be short, and had made the most of it. If he could have just a little more, now—

For in their eagerness to get their hands on the gold, the quartette had grown a bit careless. The parson had tied Chinook's hands tightly to the saddle-horns, his feet to the stirrups. But the parson, for all his good intentions, was a bungler in everything he did. The knots had been tight, but not too difficult to a man who knew something of knots and ropes. Once a knot was partly loosened, if it was faulty, it would slip in a hurry.

Chinook hadn't had much trouble with the parson's efforts. His worst handicap had been the fact that he was tied in such an awkward position, but he had pretty well overcome that by now. Both hands were free, and he was twisting about to get hold of that bowie knife which had sought to drink his blood during the night, again a bit of bungling on the part of the bogus parson—and which, well wrapped in a piece of cloth, and tied with a cord around his neck, Chinook had taken the precaution to hide under his clothes, down his back. It had been hidden so well that they had failed to find it when they took his guns.

Now he had it out. He stripped off the cloth in which it was wrapped, leaned down and sliced loose the rope which held his left foot tied to a stirrup. The keen blade cut like a hot knife in butter. And in that moment, what Mugs had predicted, happened.

It came in a sharp crackling sound, as though a plank or something had broken with the strain. And immediately behind that was a rushing, earth-shaking roar, as tons of dirt and rock from the overhang of the hill which jutted against the cabin, was released, starting to pour down over the spot where the four men were digging so eagerly.

There was a yell or so of high terror, one of them cut off short. Something was tugging at the lead ropes of the horses, and Chinook knew that this was not the hands of dead men, but something even worse—the ropes had been tied fast, conveniently close to where the quartette had been working, and fastened a couple of feet above the floor of the cabin. Now the earth slide was pouring over them as well, flattening them and jerking, all in the same operation.

Desperately, Chinook straightened, slashing at the lead rope of the horses behind him, those horses between which Mugs hung suspended in such unpleasant fashion, and as the rope was severed, that allowed

their reins to drop to the ground and stop them, automatically ground-hitched, as they had been about to start ahead.

But his own cayuse, to which Chinook was still attached by one foot in the wrong stirrup, was responding to that pull, starting to run. Chinook flung himself half-across the saddle, reached just too late in a wild grab for the bridle or rope. They were outstretched ahead of the horse now, pulled taut, out of his reach.

Which didn't seriously matter. He could ride this one cayuse to kingdom come and back in this manner, if necessary, since it was cut loose from the other horse, and he was free of the other as well. The horse would soon stop.

The thing which mattered was that two of the gang, warned in time by the preliminary crackling of that plank, had managed to get back out of the door of the cabin before the whole thing was overwhelmed and caved in by the slide—the two dangerous ones of the quartette, Hobe and Rialto.

Luck had been with them there, luck and an abiding suspicion transmuted into caution. And now, eyes staring and bloodshot with the fear of the death which had so narrowly missed them, doubly bent on vengeance, they were jerking at their guns as they saw him.

Hobe's gun was lifting, almost in his face. Chinook drew back his arm, the flashing steel in his hand sped a fraction faster than the killer's finger on the trigger. Chinook felt the whip of the bullet, cutting through his hair, barely grazing his scalp, but the blade of the bowie, deep-buried in Hobe's chest, had spoiled his aim.

But Rialto remained. Now he was triggering lead at him, while the frightened cayuse tried to plunge away, and Chinook knew that, if the horse did take him away, it would be to make him so good a target that the outlaw couldn't miss.

He was still tied to the saddle by one foot, and weaponless now. But not quite so helpless as Rialto figured. Deliberately, as the horse started to rear and turn, Chinook took the only chance. He launched himself in a sidewise plunge toward his enemy, his clutching arms reached out and found a grip, dragging Rialto to the ground with him.

And then the cayuse was running, snorting and terror-stricken, with Chinook dragging from the one foot, and a suddenly limp something which, under him, took most of the drag, and which he still clutched grimly in his arms—for the outlaw had gone limp as, lashing out in a vicious kick at the things dragging by its hooves, the cayuse had planted that hoof squarely in Rialto's face.

Abruptly then, the horse came to a trembling stop, at the end of

the lead-rope which still had the other end fast, and now doubly pinned down by the slide. As it stood, snorting fearfully, Chinook soothed it, and with an effort which taxed all his body, for the reaction left him weak, drew himself up to the saddle again.

Someone cried out, and for the first time he became aware that he and Mugs were not alone. Vivian was beside him, her face anxious, half-puckered as though she was about to cry, her arms around him, steadying him. Chinook stared at her, rather dazedly for a long moment. Then he managed a feeble grin.

"If you could sort of untie my foot—so I could get down—I could express my appreciation a lot more proper."

Vivian looked quickly up at him, a wave of color spread across her face, then she had lowered it as quickly and was fumbling at the knots. A moment later, free at last, Chinook slid to the ground and gathered her into his arms. He had a hazy recollection that somebody had once said that Deputy Tom Mobray considered that Vivian was his girl—and Tom was a nice fellow, but like Rialto, that was one thing he'd been mistaken about. There wasn't any doubt in Chinook's mind, now.

Flushed, half-laughing, half-crying still, Vivian drew back and looked at him.

"I thought you were in love—with a girl back in Kansas, or somewhere," she charged.

"That was just a dream," Chinook said. "And I woke up from it—a long time ago. Just about the time that you walked in on me and turned me loose from jail—and told me I was a fool."

"I'm sorry," she said, with sudden humbleness. "You've been wonderful—"

"I was a fool," he said. "It took you to make me see it—"

"If you two can find time to stop arguing about what you both agree on, mebby you could see that there's others present," George Ford drawled. He had freed Mugs, was standing there with him, grinning a little.

"Looks like we got here just too late for the excitement, Viv," he added. "Though after Vivian pulled a few tricks out of the hat and got me free—and I'd started out in the first place to rescue *her*—why, we burnt leather tryin' to get here. Not that there seems to be any reason for bustin' out cryin' with disappointment."

Chinook looked at Mugs. The old convict was eying the two with pride and affection in his eyes, but it was plain to Chinook that he still had no more intention of letting them know the real truth, that he was

their uncle, than before. He'd find some reasonable story to tell them for his interest in their welfare, and have the satisfaction of having done the best he could. To forestall any sudden question now, Chinook changed the subject.

"That was some booby trap you had, Mugs," he said, as they turned to survey the ruin, where a slide of tons upon tons of the hill had blotted the old shack completely away.

Mugs nodded soberly.

"Yeah—it worked, after all these years," he conceded. "I couldn't have planned anything like that, these days. But I used to be kind of smart, along those lines. It was a plank, with a lot of stuff piled above it so if any of it was dislodged, the plank'd act as a trigger and start the whole thing to slidin'. I remember how much work it took to fix it—but I guess it was worth it, at that."

"And the secret of this place was in the saddlehorn, eh? The real secret of the saddle."

Mugs shook his head.

"Nope. I remembered this place, all right. But it wasn't told about at all. That was somethin' else—but I'd remembered that, too. All I was doin' then was stallin' for time."

"There's the one bar of gold, where they lugged it out," Chinook said, and stepped across to lift it up. "But it looks as if the others, from the High Pockets, are buried deeper than they ever were, now."

Again Mugs shook his head.

"Nope," he denied. "There was another bar back in there, all right, to egg 'em on. But it was just a bar of lead, gilded over. The other bars are right under the floor in the cabin where we spent the night. I had a look at 'em last evenin', and they're all fine. So I can turn 'em all back where they belong. Sort of take the curse off it. And with the reward, there'll be somethin' for George and mebbly a weddin' present for you and Vivian. C'mon, George, let's us go get that stuff. They ain't int'rested in nothin' so common as gold—less it's in a band for a weddin' ring."

THE END

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